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Renewed interest in Russian-made Su30Mk multi-role fighter bomber

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THE procurement of new weapon systems and support equipment is the continuation of the Armed Forces' modernisation programme which was put on hold in the late 90s following the Asian financial crisis in 1997.

The shopping list includes the purchase of new helicopters and submarines for the navy; tanks and helicopters for the army; and new generation fighter aircraft, transport planes and heavy lift helicopters for the air force.

The most recent development is the renewed interest in the Russian-made Sukhoi Su30Mk multi-role, long-range fighter-bomber. Malaysia has shown keen interest in acquiring up to 16 of the twin-seater aircraft which made its debut at the Langkawi International Maritime and Aerospace exhibition last year.

Plans are also on the card to acquire an unspecified number of F/A18F fighters from the US.

A source close to the Sukhoi manufacturer, Irkutsk Aviation Industrial Association (IAPO), said a presentation was made to the air force in Kuala Lumpur in November 2000.

A request for commercial and technical proposal was made by the Ministry of Defence on Jan 17, while on March 7 last year Rosoboronexport, the Russian Government's Armaments Export Division, submitted a commercial and technical offer to Ministry of Defence soon after that.

An air force team was despatched to Russia to evaluate the aircraft's performance and capabilities between May 28 and June 4 last year.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Defence Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak, while on a four-day official visit to Russia in March, had a look at the Su30Mk's performance at the Zhukovsky Flight Test Centre in Moscow.

A source close to the Ministry of Defence said payment for the aircraft, including a barter trade agreement involving shipments of Malaysian palm oil, is expected to be made while details for the offset and technology transfer is still being worked out pending on Malaysia's decision to purchase the aircraft.

The deal, once concluded, will be the second made by Malaysia with the Russians. Malaysia purchased 18 MiG-29 Fulcrum fighter jets in 1994 for a total of RM1.56 billion under an offset programme which took 24 months to negotiate.

The current deal is said to be close to conclusion.

Other countries reportedly interested in the the Su30Mk include Indonesia and several Middle Eastern, African and Latin American countries.

The 190 Su30MkI variant ordered by India will feature canard wings, thrust vectoring engines and Western avionics. Some 140 will be manufactured under licence in India by Hindustan Aeronautics Limited.

Other Russian aircraft proposed to Malaysia include Mi-26, the world's largest helicopter, and Mi-172 helicopter.