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Turning to security matters

SINCE the end of the Cold War, defence spending has been relegated to the lower rungs of Malaysia's list of priorities. The nation was at peace - and by any standards still is - while the economy was humming along very nicely, up till the 1997 Asian financial crisis that is, and jobs were plentiful and Malaysians grew ever affluent. But it was not pure luck - unlike many other countries which have continued to be plagued by conflicts, both internal and external - that Malaysia was able to maintain harmony at home and in its relations with other nations, far and near. In fact, it worked very hard at it, and its stature on the international stage has been built as much on its steadfast subscription to the principle of mutual respect as to a readiness to speak up against injustice, no matter how unpopular. It was a good thing too that this was the situation when the Asian crisis took grip, given that the Government could tap resources earmarked for defence purposes for development programmes and various measures to bolster economic activities.

As a result, defence spending was driven down even more as the Government concentrated on rebuilding the economy. But now that full economic recovery is in sight and most of the big ticket civil development projects have been completed, Malaysia is turning its attention once more to security matters. And it has come none too soon, considering recent developments in the global security situation. Therefore, the Defence Ministry's announcement that the Government will increase military spending is by no means a signal of a shift in Malaysia's defence policy. Indeed, the country is expected to maintain its non-expansionary and non-intervention stance, and any increase in military spending is intended only for upgrading its defence capabilities - which is long overdue - and preparedness to face external threats.

During Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's recent visit to Europe, the Government announced that it would purchase the PT91 battle tanks from Poland. It was reported that the Government was also looking at purchasing the Sukhoi 30 from Russia or the FA18 Super Hornet jetfighters from the US to beef up its existing fleet of MIG-29s and basic FA18s. In addition, the Royal Malaysian Air Force is believed to be planning to acquire attack helicopters and troop transport aircraft. As for the Navy, the Government is shopping for some submarines. At the ongoing Defence Services Asia and Exhibition 2002 in Kuala Lumpur, the Defence Ministry has signed contracts to upgrade the firepower of the infantry, including buying RM84.5 million worth of Steyr assault rifles and adding more field guns to the artillery division. Other areas being looked into is the modernisation of the air defence system, including the purchase of the latest anti-aircraft missiles and command-and-control systems.

To finance the military's modernisation programme, Malaysia is expected to increase its defence budget to about 2.5 per cent of the gross national product (GNP), which by comparison to most other countries is still a miniscule amount. Singapore's Second Defence Minister Teo Chee Hean has said that his country for one understands Malaysia's need to upgrade its defence capability. After all, even after the increase in military spending, Malaysia is still devoting much less resources to the sector than Singapore does. The republic's defence allocation for 2002 constitutes about 4.9 per cent of its GNP. Malaysia's neighbours are acutely aware that the global security situation has changed, and

recognise that Malaysia cannot continue to rely on ageing military equipment and facilities to face possible threats from outside, and which may not necessarily come in the form of an outright attack. This means that special emphasis is likely to be placed, among other things, on the monitoring and protection of offshore resources and sea lanes. There is the very real concern over surreptitious threats to security, be they from terrorist groups, or drug or human cargo traffickers.

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