

PM pledges 'best tools' for military
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By Shannon Teoh

KUALA LUMPUR, Dec 6 — Datuk Seri Najib Razak underlined today his administration's commitment to defence expenditure, pointing out it was the government's duty to ensure the military had the best tools for the job.

The prime minister said at the opening this morning of the Langkawi International Maritime and Aerospace Exhibition 2011 (LIMA '11) that defence and security was important in protecting the country's sovereignty and national strategic interests.

"There can be no doubting the bravery and heroism of our men and women in uniform, and before they risk their lives to protect us, it's our duty to ensure they have the best tools for the job.

"That means giving them the latest, safest, most cutting-edge equipment capable of meeting the challenges of modern warfare," he was quoted by national news agency Bernama as saying.

He said that aerospace and maritime spending was surging as Asia enjoyed "the fastest-growing economy in the world" with defence expenditure no exception to the case.

Najib (picture) said technology-intensive sectors such as shipbuilding and ship repair and aerospace maintenance, repair and overhaul (MRO) continued to be significant contributors to Malaysia's economy.

Shipbuilding and ship repair generated more than RM7.2 billion while MRO and aerospace manufacturing contributed about RM5.5 billion to the economy.

"Taken together, these sectors provide jobs for more than 44,000 people, many of them in highly-skilled professional roles," Najib said.

Najib's remarks today come despite Defence Minister Datuk Seri Zahid Hamidi saying in October the government was not proceeding with plans to jointly develop navy ships with UK-based BAE Systems due to financial constraints.

Defence Ministry expenditure has drawn intense interest from opposition lawmakers who have continuously sought explanations for the multi-billion ringgit defence deals involving the country.

The latest was a query as to why the ministry paid RM7.6 billion for armoured personnel carriers (APC) procured by DRB-Hicom Bhd for only US\$559 million (RM1.7 billion).

A RM6 billion contract for six offshore patrol vessels (OPVs) drew similar attention at the start of the year.

An embarrassing failure by one of the country's billion-ringgit Scorpene submarines to submerge last year attracted further reservations over the prudence of the country's defence spending.

Over 400 companies from 35 countries including half of the world's top 100 maritime and aerospace suppliers are present for LIMA '11.

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