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Malaysia Airlines will be using six of its superjumbo A380 jets to serve the haj and umrah market.

MAS plans airline for haj, umrah mart

CODENAMED 'PROJECT HOPE': A380 fleet to take off by 2019

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MALAYSIA Airlines Bhd (MAS) will start a new charter airline by 2019 specifically to serve the haj and umrah market and it will use six super-jumbo Airbus A380 aircraft.

The new airline, which is yet to be named, will be Malaysia Aviation Group Bhd's (MAG) fourth passenger airline after MAS, Firefly and MASwings.

MAS chief executive officer Peter Bellew said the charter airline would fly from destinations in Africa, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Asean to Jeddah and Medina in Saudi Arabia.

"I think it's a great opportunity for us to start this and the A380 has the right size to serve the haj and umrah market," he told Business

Times on Wednesday.

The new project, codenamed "Project Hope", is in progress with staff recruitment being carried out.

MAG owns 100 per cent of MAS, Firefly, MASwings, MAB Kargo as well as other subsidiaries, including MAB Engineering, AeroDarat Services, MAB Leasing, MAB Pesawat and MAB Academy.

MAG, in turn, is 100 per cent owned by Khazanah Nasional Bhd.

According to the Centre for Aviation (CAPA), "Project Hope" is an appropriate name, given the current predicament with the A380 aircraft.

The super-jumbo hit turbulence in terms of new orders of late as airlines worldwide are starting to abandon the four-engine aircraft and switch to its sister model — the twin-engine long-range A350 — for long-haul flights.

"The flag carrier's A380 opera-

tions have been highly unprofitable and the aircraft is too big for operations to London, its only remaining long-haul route.

"As selling or subleasing the A380 is not possible, given the virtually non-existent demand for the type, establishing a new charter airline is the only sensible option — although still with some risks, given the need to find investors," said CAPA in its report recently.

CAPA also said all six of MAS's A380s would be reconfigured to up to 700 seats from 386 by end-2018 and transferred to a new operator's certificate.

MAS is currently using its A380s for haj and umrah flights as well as the Kuala Lumpur-London route.

However, the airline will replace all of its A380s with the smaller A350s for its long-haul route as part of its restructuring exercise.