

PM launches programme to design own space satellite

By Farush Khan and Azeman Said

KUALA LUMPUR, Fri. — Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad today launched the Micro-Satellite Programme, expressing confidence that it would take Malaysia a step closer to achieving the ability to design, engineer, build and launch its own spacecraft.

The Prime Minister said contracts for Measat-I and Measat-II signed in May had paved the way for Malaysia's participation in space and telecommunications

technology.

The Measat-I will be launched on Dec 20 followed by that of Measat-II in July next year.

"In addition, two satellites, built under the Micro-Satellite Programme, will be placed in orbit before the end of the decade.

"These four launches will firmly position Malaysia among nations that own and operate satellites built to satisfy their specific requirements," he added.

The two micro-satellites and associated ground facilities are estimated to cost between RM45 million and

RM50 million. Funding will come from government allocations and the private sector.

The Prime Minister said the Measat System and Micro-Satellite Programme would provide the country with a platform on which it could further develop its space and telecommunications technology.

"Hopefully, Malaysia will be one of the countries in the region that will be able to launch its own made-in-Malaysia spacecraft," he said at the launching ceremony at the National Planetarium here.

For this purpose, he said, Malaysia Space and Telecommunications Research Consortium (MAXSTAR) had been established.

He said the Measat System, together with space research and education, were an important and integral link to support the total development of a technologically advanced and efficient communications infrastructure in Malaysia.

He was pleased to note that Micro-Satellite's configuration would be finalised

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by July and the first Malaysian micro-satellite was expected to take two years to build and scheduled for launch by Arianespace in July 1997.

MAXSTAR's members are Binariang Sdn Bhd, Syarikat Telekom Malaysia Bhd, Space Science Studies Division, the Malaysian Institute of Micro-Electronics Systems (Mimos), Universiti Sains Malaysia, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia and Universiti Pertanian Malaysia.

It will undertake a Micro-Satellite Programme that will enable scientific research activities in and from space, to be conducted.

Dr Mahathir said that micro-satellites have several applications that would benefit the community.

The first micro-satellite weighing about 50 kg, will be designed to carry out scientific and educational operations and remote sensing, that is, the gathering of data from the earth's surface for resource management, land use and the protection of the environment.

"It is planned that subsequent micro-satellites will be capable of sophisticated applications, including material and component testing in space and earth-based pollution monitoring.

"The aerospace industry can also expect significant derivative benefits from the work that will be undertak-

en by MAXSTAR," he said.

Dr Mahathir said the Government was also pleased that following the G-15 Meeting in New Delhi last year, India, through the Indian Space and Research Organisation (ISRO), would support Malaysia in its space programme.

"ISRO will assist us in the development of our technology to build and launch satellites," he said, adding that he hoped this could lead to collaboration in other related activities, such as satellite broadcasting.

As part of the Measat contracts, Arianespace of France, the world's first commercial space transportation company and Hughes Space and Communications, Inc of the United States, ranked as one of the world's largest owner-operators of both government and private satellites, have also agreed to actively participate in Malaysia's space programme.

The Prime Minister said Malaysian institutions of higher learning would also benefit through participation in MAXSTAR.

He said it was envisaged that USM would be able to offer courses in satellite and launch vehicle technology and applications starting from the 1996/1997 academic year, ultimately leading to the establishment of a space technology faculty.

Apart from leading the Micro-Satellite Programme, Binariang has also provided initial funding to USM. Ar-

rangements have been made for two members of its academic staff to undergo training and internship at Hughes.

They are lecturers Dr Ahmad Sabirin and Dr Samsul Bahar Sadii, both from USM in Bandar Seri Iskandar, Perak. They are expected to leave next month.

Dr Mahathir said the space and communications industry required vast capital, human and technical resources to acquire and to keep pace with the rapidly advancing technology.

"To this end, the Government recognises the need for selected alliances among Malaysian companies and between these companies and foreign technology partners," he added.

He was confident that the joint working arrangements between Binariang and Telekom Malaysia would accelerate the development of an efficient and state-of-the-art national communications infrastructure and optimise the nation's resources.

He wished the consortium success in undertaking the ambitious task ahead.

"When Malaysia first put forward the idea of a national car, it was thought that we were being too ambitious.

"However, the record of Proton has proved our capability not only to have control over our own commercial destiny, but also our ability to interact and compete globally.

"While we are equally ambitious in the task before us, we are confident that the success of this programme will serve as a role model and inspire future generations," he said.

To mark the launch, three memoranda of understanding (MoUs) were signed at the National Planetarium, witnessed by Dr Mahathir.

They were between MAXSTAR and the ISRO, between Binariang and Arianespace, and between Binariang and USM.

Dr Mahathir also unveiled the Viking engine that will be used by the Ariane 4 launcher to propel Malaysia's first satellite, Measat-I into space from Arianespace's chairman and chief executive officer Charles Bigot.

In her welcoming speech, the director-general of the Space Science Studies Division in the Prime Minister's Department, Dr Mazlan Othman, on MAXSTAR's behalf, said Malaysia's first micro-satellite will orbit the earth from pole to pole.

She also said the Ministry of Science, Technology and Environment was sponsoring an initiative to fund research in space science and technology within the Intensive Research Priority Area framework.

"This commitment is vital because the micro-satellite cannot get off the ground, literally and figuratively, without funds. Contributions from the private sector will ease the burden of the Government," she added.