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Lead Measat-Launch  
MALAYSIA'S SECOND SATELLITE LAUNCHED

By: Azman Ujang

KOUROU (French Guiana), Nov 14 (Bernama) -- Like the launch of shuttle space missions that have captivated millions for decades, Malaysia's second satellite, Measat-2, began its 36,000km journey into orbit early Thursday morning Malaysian time after its successful lift-off from the Kourou Space Centre here.

The launch, telecast "live" to Malaysia and witnessed here by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, his wife Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohamad Ali, Information Minister Datuk Mohamed Rahmat and over 100 guests from Malaysia, also positions Malaysia into satellite technology race that will have far-reaching effects in almost every sphere of the daily lives of Malaysians.

Even Opposition leader Lim Kit Siang, a man usually critical of high-cost projects, was there to witness the event which Dr Mahathir later described as another one that was doing the country proud.

Measat-2 blasted off with its Ariane 44L launch ship, blazing fire in its trail to light up the clear night sky on the dot at 7.40pm (6.40am Thursday in Malaysia), symbolising what its owner Binariang Sdn Bhd called a vision to revolutionise the lives of a billion people all over Asia well into the 21st century.

Tension filled the atmosphere in the main control room from where the guests watched some 50 engineers manning the control panels guide Flight 92 into space as the first 32 minutes after lift-off was the most critical period in determining the success or failure of such a launch.

It was exactly 32 minutes 11 seconds later that Flight 92 was declared over, seven minutes after Measat-2 separated from its launch ship capsule.

Also launched in the same capsule as Measat-2 was Arabsat 2B, owned by the Arab League countries.

At just 5 degrees north of the Equator, Kourou in French Guiana in the northeastern coast of South America is an ideal location for satellite launches and home to Arianespace, the European consortium that specialises in this business.

This is the 10th launch by Arianespace this year.

Launching near the Equator reduces the energy required for orbit manoeuvres, saves fuel and thus allows an increased satellite lifespan with a consequent improved returns on investment.

Measat-2, like Measat-1 that was launched from here in January, was built by Hughes Space and Communications Company in Los Angeles and will remain in service for over 11 years. Both satellites cost Binariang RM600 million to build, operate and launch.

The critical period of the launch over, Dr Mahathir, who had been in deep concentration, cheered the success of the mission while some Malaysian guests held up a huge Malaysian flag, just like football or badminton fans cheering their teams back home.

Dr Mahathir said later that this was the first time he had witnessed the launch of satellites and admitted that the tension was too much for him to bear.

"To be frank I was pessimistic at first, because usually I am the jinx. That is why I never like to watch football or other sports matches as the team I support would usually lose. But this time, I am happy that it was a success," he said.

"I feel very happy and very relieved that it was over. I don't think I

can stand the tension because at my age I should expose myself as little as possible to anything that induces tension," he said.

He also commented favourably on the "rare" presence of Lim Kit Siang at such a ceremony.

"I think it's good for him to come and see that what we are doing is for the good of Malaysia and I think he appreciates that too.

"Kit Siang understands although he makes some noises in Parliament, critical of the government and critical of me. That is okay. I could make friends with even my enemies," he added.

The Prime Minister said Malaysia was always keen to learn more about space technology, rockets and space vehicles, and would have to learn about these to make progress.

He said there were other spin-offs from learning such knowledge and hoped that Malaysia would one day be able to launch its own satellites.

Asked how Malaysians could benefit from the satellite technology which companies like Binariang had ventured into, Dr Mahathir said it would be used mainly for telecommunications and broadcasting for the nation to have some control over the contents of broadcast.

"We would have a say in what is being broadcast, otherwise we are only on the receiving end. You know, it's not very satisfying or satisfactory to just receive news as broadcast by other people. They have other agendas and we should determine that our own agendas be attended to," he said.

He said Malaysia was also working with foreign partners to develop micro satellites, describing this as a new learning process which is important to the country.

Asked on the recent acquisition of British-based car maker Lotus by Malaysian interests, he said it was not aimed solely at reducing Malaysia's current dependence on the Japanese for its car manufacturing technology.

It had more significance because Malaysia always wanted to do things on its own and it was better for Malaysia to acquire technology which other people already had.

"But from then on, we should try to advance and make our own improvements on the technology that we acquire. We have benefited from the Japanese and they have given us some technology. I don't see why we should deprive ourselves of this opportunity to learn from other sources and I don't think the Japanese would object.

"But, on the other hand, I think the connection with the Japanese is useful because from them, we could understand automotive engineering and it would be wrong for us to discard one simply because we have found another," he said. -- BERNAMA

AU YBY