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Masa vital for our space venture

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BEGINNING last year, Oct 4 to 10 was declared World Space Week by the United Nations. Oct 4 and 10 were chosen to mark the anniversary of two great milestones of humanity's expansion into space.

Oct 4, 1957 is the date of the launch into outer space of the first human-made Earth satellite, Sputnik I, thus opening the way for space exploration.

Oct 10, 1967 is significant due to the fact that it is the date of the entry into force of the Treaty on Principles Governing the Activities of States in the Exploration and Peaceful Uses of Outer Space, including the moon and other celestial bodies

The modern world is influenced by the advancement of technology. Space activities demand advanced technical innovations - they offer so much benefit.

Space provides unbounded opportunities for expanding mankind's understanding and utilisation of resources of the universe and for improving the quality of life.

Most of the contentious issues regarding the proper relationship between space and international security have not been resolved and remain highly controversial until today.

For Malaysia, it remains unclear how much our national space policy should adapt to reflect the new international security environment.

At the same time, it is very clear that space policy issues are more important and complex than ever due to factors like the proliferation of ballistic missiles and blurring distinction between military and civil space system.

Malaysia has no choice but to join the race to exploit space resources.

Opportunities are aplenty in the area of research and development, derivative industries, commercial applications and professional services in related fields.

Although Malaysia's involvement in the space race is still in its infancy stage, aggressive efforts have propelled the country to acquire the technology in a leap-frogging manner.

No doubt that this technology can be a strong catalyst for economic development of Malaysia in the new millennium.

Malaysia's involvement in the space sector started with the implementation of the Blueprint for the Development of the Malaysian Aerospace Industry in 1995.

Among the key recommendation is the establishment of a national level steering committee, in the form of a national aerospace council.

This council will formulate key decisions such as directions, priorities and strategies for the aerospace industry.

Another key recommendation is the establishment of the national aerospace co-ordinating body to act as the reference point for various aerospace activities.

This body will consolidate national initiative in the aerospace sector and spearhead Malaysia's involvement in the industry.

In order for the Government to keep abreast of the national and international space activities and to set policy in the national interest, it is deemed necessary that another key recommendation in the blueprint be implemented as soon as possible.

The recommendation in question is the establishment of the Malaysian

Agency for Space Administration or Masa.

As stated by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad during the launching of the blueprint on Dec 5, 1997, Masa would ensure the efficient management of our space venture, which includes the development of a national satellite programme to develop our industrial and technology capability in this area.

Masa can provide advice on space policy and facilitate commercial space activities and interaction with other Governments beyond the role and responsibilities of individual organisations involved in space research.

It will also serve to promote Malaysia's national security and international stability by providing decision makers and the public with information and analysis on civil and military space issues, policies and programmes.

Malaysia's space programme, through Masa, can vitalise and promote international co-operation in space as a means of improving global co-operation to solve problems on earth.

The space can be used as a domain of collaboration, rather than conflict.

Many of the global issues facing mankind today can be dealt with efficiently if we can understand their scientific underpinnings.

Good diplomacy is becoming more dependent on good science, in this case, space science. Information from space-based sources is central to the good science in dealing with global issues.

Ozone depletion, deforestation, fish conservation, coral reef degradation, climate change and its consequences; these are but a few of the areas where we rely heavily on scientific analysis of data from space to facilitate decision making and build international consensus.

Space activities and issues are inherently international and Masa is in the best position to provide advice to government agencies on foreign policy matters.

Space activities are no longer monopolised by a handful of Governments. In some nations, commercial spending on space exceeds government spending. By the last count, at least 50 countries have space programmes of sorts.

In July last year, 100 countries sent delegates to the United Nations Third Conference on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space in Vienna - a clear indication of the wide interest in using the space as a means to improve lives on earth.

Masa can play an important role to promote the interest of the Malaysian space and aerospace industry. Maintaining leadership in space has been the nation's policy objective.

In today's arena, "space leadership" and "aerospace industry leadership" are synonymous. The aerospace sector's contribution to Malaysian export earnings cannot be denied.

In order for Malaysian companies to be at the cutting edge of space technology and for them to compete on a level playing field, a good and sound space agency is needed.

The space frontier is no doubt important to the future economic growth and political power of any nation in the new millennium.

Earth orbiting satellites have already revolutionised telecommunications, weather forecasting and military reconnaissance.

In the near future, the space may change beyond recognition in sectors such as energy production, micro-gravity industry, tourism and long-haul freight transports.

A good and sound national space policy can have a positive effect upon the opening of the new frontiers of space in a number of ways.

In this respect, Malaysia can enjoy the benefits of economic growth and political power.

Malaysia is facing a crisis of sorts in the aerospace sector.

In the globalised world of economy, foreign competition makes it very difficult for local aerospace companies to compete. Major infusions in terms of sound policy are needed to inject new life into the industry. The research and technology of this high-tech industry holds great promise.

Masa will certainly add new impetus and life to Malaysia's very own space programme.