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USM scientists off to Antarctica

PENANG, Sat. - Four Universiti Sains Malaysia scientists are off on a three-month research-cum-study trip to Antarctica with a group of Australian scientists in January.

They will help to explore the possibility of setting up a research base on the icy continent.

The four-member team's co-ordinator, Prof Mashhor Mansor, said today that if viable, the project would be Malaysia's first research station on the southern continent.

The trip, initially to be centred on ecological survey, follows suggestions by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's to conduct more research and studies on Antarctica.

"We are new in the study of Antarctica and we need the experience of Australia and New Zealand to assist us," Mashhor said, adding that China and India were among the Asian countries which had set up research stations in Antarctica.

Mashhor, who was speaking at a Press conference at USM during a visit by Australian and German scientists, said he would be accompanied by three other scientists - Associate Prof Dr Zulfigar Yasin, Dr Wan Maznah Wan Omar and Sazlina Salleh for the trip to Antarctica.

The three visiting scientists who attended the Malaysian International Seminar on Antarctica Opportunities in Kuala Lumpur on Tuesday are Dr Andrew McMinn of the University of Tasmania, Dr Simon Wright of the Australian Antarctic Division and Dr Ing Hans Oerter of the German-based Foundation for Polar and Marine Research.

The trip, Mashhor said, was a collaborative effort between the Malaysian and Australian governments and "there will be more visits to the continent after our initial voyage in January".

The four scientists will be accompanied by a 60-member group of researchers and scientists on board the ice-breaker Aurora Australis which will depart on Jan 3 from Hobart for Mawson station in Antarctica.

McMinn said the trip to Antarctica would benefit the Malaysian scientists as it would allow them to learn new techniques in research.

"Everything that they do in Antarctica will be showcased throughout the world. That will be great as the world will get to see how good the Malaysian scientists are," said McMinn.