

No age limit to be M'sian astronaut

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KUALA LUMPUR: The first Malaysian astronaut can be just the man in the street, a professor or a soldier.

Anybody can be the country's first person in outer space if they are fit, intelligent and have the right aptitude, said Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

"He can be an academician, an ordinary person or a military person. Anybody can be trained but the person must have the minimum qualifications," the Prime Minister told reporters after a briefing on the country's space programme at Technology Park Malaysia in Bukit Jalil here, yesterday.

He also named Malaysia's second earth observation satellite *RazakSAT*, as a tribute to the country's second Prime Minister, Tun Abdul Razak Hussain.

The satellite, which can capture digital images of objects which are a minimum 2.5m in dimension, is jointly developed by Astronautic Technology (M) Sdn Bhd (ATSB) and SaTReci Co Ltd of South Korea and is expected to be

launched in Au&t next year..

ATSB, which was set up to develop Malaysia's space technology capabilities, designed, developed, launched and operated the country's first micro-satellite *TiungSAT-1* which was launched in September 2000.

Dr Mahathir said the Government would be calling for volunteers to train with the Russians to become the first Malaysian to go into space in 2005, adding that the training would take two years even though Malaysia was a latecomer in the field.

"We have people who have experience. We can learn from them. We do not have to reinvent the wheel," he said.

The programme is part of an agreement signed with Russia for the purchase of 18 Sukhoi fighter jets. Russia would buy Malaysia's palm oil and provide transfer of space technology as well as train the Malaysian astronaut.

The deal was signed on Tuesday, during the official visit by Russian President Vladimir Putin to Malaysia

early this week.

On ATSB, Dr Mahathir said it had made good progress in space technology, adding: "Initially when we wanted to make a satellite, we asked others to do it but we found that our own engineers have the ability.

"After they were trained in South Korea, they can now make their own components."

National Space Agency director-general Prof Datuk Dr Mazlan Othman said the agency would be calling for space volunteers within the next two months, adding that no age limit has been set.

"Two Malaysians will be selected to train in Russia for 18 months, and two others will be on standby in Malaysia," she said.

The candidates in Russia would have to learn the language and live away from home for the duration.

"Whoever is sent up will also be trained to conduct scientific experiments while in space," Dr Mazlan added.