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## Moving towards space edge

By Izwan Ismail

MALAYSIA will be launching a RM500 million space programme to send astronauts to space by 2007. This initiative will be realised with the co-operation between Malaysia and Russia in the field of aerospace technology transfer.

According to Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Mohd Najib Tun Abdul Razak, it has been the Government's dream to explore space. "Besides focusing on strategic fields such as biotechnology and information and communications technology, aerospace exploration is also being looked at and developed," he says.

Najib adds that the Government has been and will keep on initiating aerospace initiatives similar to the launch of the country's first satellite Measat-1 to orbit in 1996. "We are also developing another satellite known as RazakSat, which will be launched to orbit next year."

On who will become the country's first astronaut, Najib says the Government is still in the process of selecting the suitable individual for this mission, and the person will be announced next year.

Former Prime Minister Tun Mahathir Mohamad once said: "The first Malaysian astronaut can be just the man on 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."

Thus, it would be interesting to know who will be granted this honour.

Another Government effort to develop the local aerospace industry is done through the establishment of the National Space Agency, which manages the Government's needs in aerospace and satellite technology and creates the national aerospace policy. The Government has also launched the National Astronaut Programme to send astronauts to space by 2007, besides aerospace technology transfer between Malaysia and Russia.

"At the education level, we have created a degree programme in aerospace science at Universiti Sains Malaysia. To date, USM offers an aerospace engineering programme which stresses on the designing of space vehicles and satellites," Najib says, adding that Malaysia still lacks scientists to advance the country in space technology.

"To date, we only have 18 scientists for every 10,000 people, which is very low," he says. The Government is targeting to have 60 scientists for every 10,000 people, he adds.

To create more interest among the public in the aerospace space, the Government is initiating the Malaysia International Aerospace Show 2005 (Mias 2005) as a national programme, in line with the Government's mission to become the first Southeast Asian country to organise a world-class aerospace expo. The programme will be held in Kuala Lumpur in June and July next year. HeiTech Padu Bhd and Intelserve Sdn Bhd are the co-organisers of the event.

Najib says such a programme is capable of helping the Government to provide early education and change the public's perception on the importance of the aerospace industry. The programme will include all the related information on space exploration, which will provide valuable exposure to the public.

The programme is also a means to educate the Malaysian public about aerospace and satellite technology.

"The main attraction of the programme would be the real-life Russian space shuttle known as Buran, which will be brought in to the country for

the first time," Najib says.

Buran is the only authentic space shuttle to go on public display in the world. Buran, which means snow storm in Russian, has flown no less than 25 sub-orbital flights for the elite Russian cosmonauts. It is said to be the first spacecraft to undertake a completely automated launch, orbital manoeuvre, de-orbit and precision landing.

Besides the Buran display, other activities of the programme include launch experience theatre, space artifacts gallery, astronaut training, lunar landing shows and various simulator shows.

The programme, Najib says, will also be an ideal and strategic platform for aerospace and international companies, scientists, academicians and the public to share ideas and knowledge with regard to the aerospace industry.

"This will be a stepping stone for the Government to attract the interests of local and foreign investors to develop the aerospace industry in this country, especially in the aspects of technology transfer and development of skilled workers," he concludes.

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