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Any Malaysian can be selected to be first person in space

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KUALA LUMPUR, Thurs. - Anyone, even an "ordinary Malaysian", can become the country's first person in space in 2005, not necessarily one who is a pilot or has military background. Selection will begin in two months.

Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today the selection committee chaired by National Space Agency director-general Prof Datuk Mazlan Othman would be inviting Malaysians from all walks of life to apply.

The Prime Minister said Malaysia's first astronaut could be "anybody at all" - an academic, military personnel or others.

"The person must have the minimum qualifications and selection will be based on health, knowledge and skills. In the end, two or three persons will be chosen for training (in Russia).

"We need to have backup in case the main person selected cannot participate in the launch," he said after visiting Astronautic Technology (M) Sdn Bhd (ATSB) at Technology Park Malaysia.

ATSB was established to develop Malaysia's space technology capabilities. It designed, developed, operated and launched Malaysia's first micro-satellite TiungSAT-1 on Sept 26, 2000.

Dr Mahathir was briefed on Malaysia's second observation satellite, which was today officially named RazakSAT as a tribute to Malaysia's second Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak.

The RazakSAT was previously called MacSAT.

Dr Mahathir expressed confidence that the first Malaysian would be launched into space by 2005.

"We can do it. In those days, it took time because there were so many things we did not know. But now we have people with experience. We can learn from them ... we don't have to re-invent the wheel."

Defence Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak announced on Tuesday that Malaysia would launch a programme in 2005 to send an astronaut to space as part of an offset programme for its purchase of 18 Sukhoi fighter jets worth US\$900 million (RM3.42 billion) from Russia.

Najib, who announced this on the sidelines of a delegation meeting between Malaysia and Russia in conjunction with the visit of Russian President Vladimir Putin, said it would be a first for the country and would encourage more Malaysians to look at space travel and aerospace technology.

On the RazakSAT, which is expected to be launched in mid-August next year, Dr Mahathir said "good progress" had been made.

"At first we had wanted to ask other people to develop it for us but we saw that our engineers were capable. After we sent them for training in South Korea, they were able to come up with their own components.

"I see that we have the capability. Our only constraint is that we started late. We need to get the experience and spend money ... that is the only problem."

The development of the RazakSAT marks the first time a satellite is being developed by Malaysian engineers. Sixteen ATSB engineers are directly involved in the development of the satellite and its payload.

The satellite will be able to capture digital images of objects bigger than 2.5 square metres, and is more advanced than the TiungSAT-1.

Meanwhile, Mazlan, who was also present at the function, said the Malaysian chosen would be part of the Russian crew and perform scientific experiments in space. "However, the astronaut need not be specialised in

the field as he or she can be trained."

Mazlan said applicants would have their health and IQ tested, among others. "The person must be able to withstand high speeds. Applicants will be spun at high speed until they become unconscious as part of the screening procedure."

She said two persons, with one serving as backup, would be selected for training in Russia for 18 months to be "professional astronauts".

She, however, added that the applicants must hold degrees.