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7,000 applications expected for astronaut programme

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PEKAN, Sat. - The Malaysian Astronaut Programme Committee is expected to receive up to 7,000 applications before the end of the year when the candidates are chosen.

It said 4,467 people had submitted their applications until yesterday.

Describing the figure as encouraging, Defence Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak said the committee was expecting another 3,000-odd applications by the end of the year when it would start the vetting.

The committee - comprising the Defence Ministry, National Space Agency and several ministries including the Science, Technology and Environment and Education Ministries - has decided that two Malaysians will be accompanied by another two as substitutes.

"There will be four rounds of vetting after this and the final stage will be a two-plus-two system where the chosen two will be backed up with another two in case of an emergency," he said after presenting gifts to representatives from 43 mosques and 126 surau at Sekolah Sains Sultan Haji Ahmad Shah today.

He said the initial figure would be reduced to 200 and that was where the intensive selection process began.

"The 200 shortlisted candidates must possess tertiary qualification, have considerable work experience in flying and in science and technology and must be involved in outdoor activities such as scuba diving and mountain climbing."

He said the number would be further reduced to 30 and later 10 for the fourth round where they would be sent to the International Space Station in Russia for an 18-month intensive training programme.

"The final four will be selected from the 10 and we will adopt the two-plus-two system when we send them to space in 2005," he added.

At a Press conference on Oct 13, he had said that all applicants must be medically and psychologically fit, where their vision ratings must be 20/70, blood pressure of 120-80 (sitting) or 140-90 (standing).

On the breakdown of the 4,467 applicants, he said the committee found that 82 per cent were men, while 18 per cent women.

In terms of age, 3,249 were between 21 and 30, 605 (between 31 and 40), 470 (below 21), 97 (between 41 and 50), and 46 people over 50.

Malaysia's involvement in the space programme came about after an agreement with Russia following the purchase of 18 Sukhoi Su-30 MKM fighter jets worth US\$900 million (RM3.42 billion).

On a separate issue, he said Western news agencies had deliberately made out Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad as anti-Semitic.

"They twisted certain things from his keynote address at the Organisation of Islamic Conference, which made him look like he was anti-Jew."