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Plan to send Malaysian into space in 2005

PUTRAJAYA, Tues. - Malaysia will 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, Defence Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak said today.

He said it was hoped the Malaysian cosmonaut would spend time in outer space under the programme.

"It will be a first for Malaysia and it will encourage more Malaysians to look at space travel, aerospace technology and so on," he said on the sidelines of the delegation meeting between Malaysia and Russia in conjunction with the visit of Russian President Vladimir Putin.

According to the Bernama report, the agreement for the purchase of the Su-30 MKM multirole combat aircraft was also signed today.

Najib said the payment would not burden the government for it was stretched until 2009.

He added that the bulk of the payment would come under the Ninth Malaysia Plan.

Elaborating on the payment mechanism, he said that Russia would implement a transfer of technology and offset programme worth US\$270 million (RM1.026 million), constituting 30 per cent of the value of the contract.

In a counter-purchase arrangement, Russian will buy US\$270 million worth of palm oil from Malaysia while the rest of the aircraft purchase will be paid for in cash by Malaysia.

He said six of the Sukhoi would be handed over in June 2006 and another six at the end of 2006.

The last batch would be delivered in 2007, he said.

Najib said the war planes would be equipped according to the specifications determined by the Royal Malaysian Air Force (RMAF).

The warplanes are expected to have a mix of Russian and Western avionics.

He said that the high performance aircraft would stand out for their onboard system, manoeuvrability, speed and their state-of-the-art weaponry.

"Those features would make them the best in the region and one of the best in the world," he said.

The minister said that Malaysia was also keen to see the setting up of a service centre for the maintenance of the aircraft with the help of Russia.

It could also serve similar aircraft from other countries, he said.

The offset programme will also entail the setting up of a simulator for the Sukhoi with the collaboration of a local company that will be determined later.

"We are also asking the Russians to pinpoint the components that can be supplied by Malaysia, maybe non-critical components.

"The Russians are also looking into this," he said.

Najib said that pilot training was another aspect that was being discussed by both sides.

He said that Malaysian pilots might be allowed to follow basic training in Russia as well as in India.

Meanwhile, according to an AP report, the ITAR-Tass news agency quoted Putin as saying "I think we'll realise it" to Dr Mahathir about the

cosmonaut plan during a brief courtesy call earlier.

In Moscow, a spokesman for the Russian space agency Rosaviakosmos said the Malaysian cosmonaut would visit the International Space Station aboard a Soyuz craft after undergoing more than 12 months of training, the ITAR-Tass news agency reported.