

Space mission worth it, Dr M says after seeing spacesuit
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Malaysia's decision to send a man into space in 2007 had cost the country a cool US\$25 million, but close to a decade after, former Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad believes it was well worth it.

He said this after viewing the space suit worn by Dr Sheikh Muszaphar Shukor, worn during his 2007 space mission aboard the Russian Soyuz TMA-11.

"Sending a man into space is an achievement because not many people or countries have succeeded to do so.

"We from Malaysia have done it and I am very proud," Mahathir said.

"Of course the cost is high but if we did not do it, we would be left behind," he said.

While Sheikh Muszaphar's sojourn on the Soyuz did not technically cost anything, it was tied to Malaysia's purchase of 18 Sukhoi Su-30M multirole fighters jets from Russia which then priced at US\$ 25 million.

He stressed that the government must know its priorities in spending and that the cost will be even higher today.

"For the government today, the priority is to invest in this and that (to get) additional income," he noted.

Mahathir, whom Sheikh Muszaphar describes as Malaysia's 'father of space' received a courtesy visit from Malaysia's first spaceman and Russian comonaut Salizhan Sharipoz.

Sheikh Muszaphar recently purchased the space suit and will go on a tour to schools with the suit.

Speaking at the press conference, Sheikh Muszaphar said it would now cost the government US\$55 million to send a second Malaysian into space.

No plans for second Malaysian in space

"It used to cost US\$25 million but now it has become US\$55 million to send a man to space and (all space missions) have been booked until 2020," he said, adding that there are currently 550 astronauts from 34 countries.

Noting that there will be no immediate plans for a second Malaysian mission into space, he said the government's Program Angkasawan Negara is currently focused on encouraging more school-going children to venture into careers in science and aerospace engineering.

He added that the government may target to resume its "second man in space" mission within the next five to 10 years.

During his 22-years as prime minister, Mahathir had envisioned Malaysia reaching a developed nation status by the Year 2020.

With less than five years to go before Vision 2020, Mahathir today said a developed nation is not measured only based on its per capita income, singling out Saudi Arabia as an economically rich but underdeveloped country in other areas.

"We must be at par with other developed nations in other areas as well. Not just (per capita) income," he said.