

Doctor to be our first astronaut

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PUTRAJAYA: The race to be the first Malaysian in space has been decided after months of stringent training and medical tests at the Russian Space Agency in Star City.

Dr Sheikh Muszaphar Shukor, 34, will lift off on Sept 2 next year with the Russian expedition to the International Space Station.

Dentist Dr Faiz Khaleed has been chosen as the back-up and will undergo the same training.

In making the announcement yesterday, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi said the pair had not only beaten more than 10,000 candidates for the chance of a lifetime, but had also earned a place in the history of the country.

At the ceremony, all four contenders, including pilot Capt Mohammed Faiz Kamaluddin, 34, and engineer S. Vanajah, 35, were called on stage for the final round of

elimination.

Sheikh Muszaphar told the Press that he had been positive about securing one of the final two berths.

The doctor-cum-model said modelling would take a back seat as his heart and soul was set on the space mission.

"...and no, I don't think that the media exposure had anything to do with my selection. It's not about looks, it's about mental and psychological strength.

"I believe I got the place based on merit. Rather than being a fashion model, I want to be a role model," said the Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia Hospital orthopaedic doctor.

"I love medicine and surgery. I will absorb the knowledge and experience from this mission into my research. I plan to conduct orthopaedic studies on the evolution of bone cells in space.

"I will sacrifice all I have and put all my efforts into making this mission a success."

Dr Sheikh Muszaphar expects the training, which



Abdullah (centre) celebrates with Dr Sheikh Muszaphar (left) and Dr Faiz after the announcement yesterday.

begins next month, to be grueling.

This, he said, includes being exposed to extreme weather conditions of below 40° Celsius and training to adapt to zero gravity.

An elated Dr Faiz, a captain and dental surgeon in the Armed Forces, said his and Dr Sheikh Muszaphar's achievement is not a personal one as they will represent Malaysia in space.

"The whole experience has been really enriching for me. Apart from learning a lot about space technology, I have also benefitted from character-building exercises," said

Dr Faiz, showing off his Russian language skills.

Asked if being in the spotlight had brought many admirers, Dr Faiz, who is single, grinned sheepishly and said he'd had his fair share of attention.

At a Press conference earlier, Science, Technology and Innovation Minister Datuk Seri Dr Jamaludin Jarjis said although Dr Sheikh Muszaphar came out tops in the selection process, the final decision would take into account the recommendations of the Russian Medical Council.

On this, Dr Faiz said: "Sheikh (Muszaphar) is the priority, but



Mohammed Faiz and Vanajah were among the four who underwent stringent training and tests in Russia.

I will have to be ready for anything. That is part of the job."

Also present at the ceremony was National Astronaut programme selection panel chair-

man Tun Haniff Omar, Russian ambassador to Malaysia Alexander A. Karchava and Space Agency director-general Datuk Mazlan Osman.