

Doctors make final cut in astronaut race

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SEPANG: Medical officer Dr Sheikh Muszaphar Shukor and army dental surgeon Kapt Dr Faiz Khaleed are Malaysia's final two astronaut candidates.

Announcing this at the Bunga Raya Complex of the KL International Airport yesterday, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi urged

them to make the nation proud and put Malaysia on the map.

He also congratulated every person and organisation involved in selecting the candidates to be the country's first astronaut from the more than 10,000 applicants.

Dr Sheikh Muszaphar, 34, and Kapt Dr Faiz, 26, were shortlisted from four finalists.

The other two were senior quality engineer S. Vanajah and

34-year-old commercial airline pilot Capt Mohammed Faiz Kamaludin.

Dr Sheikh Muszaphar, attached to Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia Hospital, and Kapt Dr Faiz will undergo a 12-month training stint in Russia.

They will leave for the Yuri Gagarin Aerospace Training Centre at Star City in Moscow at end of the month.

The successful candidate is

scheduled to leave for the International Space Station on Sept 2 next year to undergo a research and development programme, including research on cancer and biotechnology.

Selection committee chairman Tun Mohammed Hanif Omar told reporters that both Vanajah and Capt Mohammed Faiz lost out during their recent stint at the Russian Space

Agency in Moscow.

"Vanajah suffered stress during a gravity test and Capt Mohammed Faiz was found to have a medical problem."

Science, Technology and Innovation Minister Datuk Seri Dr Jamaluddin Jarjis said that before the Moscow stint, Dr Sheikh Muszaphar and Capt Mohammed Faiz had the best marks but since the latter had a medical problem, Kapt Dr Faiz

was chosen instead.

"But this still does not mean Dr Sheikh Muszaphar will be the astronaut as anything can happen," he said.

Dr Jamaluddin said the programme would also help make children realise the importance of space science.

"There are plans to have teleconferencing access to the Malaysian astronaut during his time in space," he said.