



»As far as the Russian Space Agency was concerned, the two (Angkasawan) were cosmonauts«

# Celebrating

The adventures of our Angkasawan will mark the country's 50 years of nationhood but also

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**O**UR two Angkasawan are primed to go and in the next 24 hours, Dr Sheikh Muszaphar Shukor and Kapt Dr Faiz Khaleed will know which one of them will become the first Malaysian to travel to space.

For almost a year our two brave boys have undergone rigorous training to become full-fledged astronauts but critics back home have seen fit to call them space tourists.

The armchair sceptics questioned their credentials and cited a Nasa website, which listed Dr Sheikh Muszaphar and Kapt Dr Faiz as participants, as the reason why they doubt that the two are really astronauts.



**COMMENT**  
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Kapt Dr Faiz tells of how they were given strange stares when the two of them first arrived at the Star City Cosmodrome just outside Moscow for their training.

"There were some American and Japanese astronauts already undergoing training who called us Malaysian supermen.

"At first we thought they were

# 50 in space

not only add to the celebrations of the  
man's golden anniversary in space.

teasing us but as we got to know them we found that they really thought we were super-fit athletes. All this was because of an inaccurate news report that said we ran 36km within an hour and this was the requirement to qualify.

"For a while, Sheikh (how the UKM doctor is referred to by all those involved in the programme) and I let the story go uncorrected but it also meant that we had to run a lot just to show off but eventually we told them that it was 3.6km in an hour," the armed forces captain said in one of our many conversations in the past year.

Many tend to think of an astronaut as someone who flies the spacecraft but that is not true.

The fact of the matter is that is our boys are not astronauts but full-fledged cosmonauts. Some people forget that the first man in space was Yuri Gagarin - a Russian cosmonaut. Thus, it is more prestigious to be a cosmonaut than an astronaut.

However, we have chosen to refer to our boys as Angkasawan. Why?

Check any English dictionary and the definition of an astronaut or cosmonaut is a space traveller who works in a spacecraft. That is the same definition for the Malay word Angkasawan.

Russian Ambassador to Malaysia Alexander Karchava said our two boys were well qualified and as far as the Russian Space Agency was concerned, the two were cosmonauts.

"Russia does not see him as a mere passenger to the International Space Station (ISS). He is a researcher. The experiments he will carry out were discussed between Russia and Malaysia," Karchava said.

The Malaysian in space will have to carry out several experiments which can have a bearing on the future industries that can be set up in Malaysia.

Many jokes have been made about the Angkasawan bringing Malaysian food to space but that simple act will enable local scientists to determine how well our local food travel in a vacuum.

No other country is going to carry out such a task for you and this research can enable exporters of our foodstuff to come out with different packing.

Ever wondered why satay in

London does not taste as good as that in Kajang. Our Angkasawan may bring back the answer and further research may ensure that the taste stays the same in the future.

There are three other experiments to be done and at least one is being done together with the European Space Agency.

The Russians are so impressed with our experiments that they have invited our scientists to draw up some experiments for their proposed manned flight to Mars. Now that is a sign of approval.

When the programme was first suggested six years ago, it was planned for a blast off earlier this year but everything was delayed after the shuttle *Columbia* disintegrated over Texas, killing all seven astronauts.

The delays meant that not only will Malaysia still get to send her Angkasawan on her golden jubilee year of independence but also on the flight which will mark the 50th anniversary of man's first venture into space.

On Oct 4, 1957, the whole world woke up to the exciting announcement that Russia had succeeded to put an object into space and orbit the Earth. That was the launch of Sputnik, the event that started the space race.

The Russians (then the Soviet Union) followed that with Gagarin's flight. This really spurred the technological advancement in space science. The Americans then followed up with its own manned mission and its first mission to the moon in 1969.

The technology that was developed for space benefited mankind in so many ways. Many things that we use today are due to inventions meant for the space ventures.

It will not be too far fetched to think that the results from the experiments by our Angkasawan can also spur a brand new industry in Malaysia.

But more than that, hopefully children will be inspired to be interested in science for science's sake and not as a subject in school.

More Russian and American scientists today were inspired by the space race than any other single event. Maybe the same will be said of our initial venture into space.