

Muszaphar on 'ride of his life'

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KUALA LUMPUR: Angkasawan Dr Sheikh Muszaphar Shukor is experiencing the ride of his life, said former Nasa astronaut Capt Robert L. Gibson.

"When he comes down, the first thing he will say is that he wants to go back up again."

Gibson, who has been up in space for five times with the US space agency, was the astronaut who flew the first space shuttle and dock it to the Russian MIR space station in 1995.

He was also part of the crew of the Challenger when it flew on its first successful mission in 1984, two years before it exploded several seconds after its take-off in 1986.

Gibson said he considered Dr Muszaphar a peer.

"If you have flown in space, you are an astronaut. Dr Muszaphar has been trained by the Russians for a year now and he is qualified," he said at the live telecast of the launching of the first national angkasawan to the International Space Station at the Kuala Lumpur Convention Centre yesterday.

He was invited to the event by the Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation to provide on-the-spot explanation of events taking place during the launching.

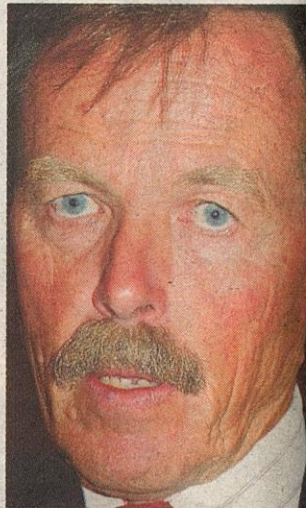
According to Gibson, Dr Muszaphar will hear "a deafening roar from where he is sitting".

"He would be pushed back in his seat at 1.4 times the force of gravity or at 1.4Gs at blast-off. But once he is in space and floating around, he'll probably not want to walk on solid ground again."

Gibson said Muszaphar would be orbiting 16 times a day.

"This means he will get to watch the sunrise 16 times."

Though astronauts were prepared for the physical and mental aspects of what to do in space, Gibson felt they were never quite prepared emo-



Capt Robert Gibson says once you have gone to space, you want to go up again

tionally for what they would see in space.

"You see the coast of Africa in matter of minutes and you go 'Wow'. I am pretty sure Dr Muszaphar will be very much more emotional than he expects to be," said Gibson.

Gibson said that he still dreams of being in a gravity-free atmosphere.

"It's the most fun thing, the most wonderful free feeling. I'll never forget it."



A group of Malaysians watching the live telecast of the lift-off in Kuala Lumpur last night.

All eyes fixed on lift-off

KUALA LUMPUR: All eyes were glued to the nine big screens as the Soyuz TMA-11 lifted off carrying Malaysia's first angkasawan Dr Sheikh Muszaphar Shukor.

Many held their breath when the space rocket began to fire up its engine for the take-off.

And when it finally happened, the 1,800-strong crowd gathered at the Kuala Lumpur Convention Centre yesterday to witness the launch in Baikonur, Kazakhstan, including Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ah-

mad Badawi and Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak, broke into a loud applause.

The crowd went wild earlier as they spotted a Malaysian flag on the rocket.

Each time Dr Muszaphar appeared on the screen, the crowd would clap and whistle. Najib later said there "was definitely a buzz in the air".

The first visuals of the astronaut in the spacecraft showed him holding a green manual. A Malaysian flag stitched on the sleeve of his space suit was clearly visible.

There was a live crossover interview with Science, Technology and Innovation Minister Datuk Jamaludin Jarjis in Baikonur where he informed the prime minister that Dr Muszaphar had been eager and excited about the expedition.

Abdullah asked Jamaludin to send his regards to the other Malaysian astronaut, Capt Dr Faiz Khaleed.

A representative of the Kazakhstan government congratulated Abdullah and the Malaysian government on the success of the programme.

Not selected but duo still brimming with hope



Vanajah Siva says she will jump at an opportunity to sign up for a second space trip



Capt Mohammed Faiz Kamaluddin hopes mission will help development of science and technology in Malaysia

KUALA LUMPUR: Although Vanajah Siva was not chosen to be the first Malaysian in space, she still hopes that one day she will be the first Malaysian woman astronaut.

As one of the final four who were selected as potential astronaut candidates, Vanajah was devastated when she was told that she would not be in the final two.

"I knew that my gender was not a factor with regard to the results, but I was devastated, nevertheless," she said.

Asked if she would sign up for a second space trip in the future, Vanajah said she would jump at the opportunity anytime.

"Without a blink and no second thoughts about it. Just show me where to sign."

However, she makes it clear that being an astronaut for her is more than "girl power".

"A chance to travel to outer space as a contribution to the development of my country and the betterment of the human race is not just a competition, it's a dream."

Despite being the only woman,

Vanajah said she bonded well with the other three male candidates.

She became good friends with one of them, Capt Mohammed Faiz Kamaludin, a pilot with Malaysia Airlines.

Like Vanajah, Faiz said that just because he was not chosen to be the final two astronaut candidates, it did not mean that his day would never come.

"If Malaysia decides to put a man on a second space mission, count me in. I'll sign up at the drop of a hat," said the 35-year-old.

Vanajah and Faiz both said they had full confidence in Dr Sheikh Muszaphar Shukor and his back-up Capt Dr Faiz Khaleed.

"Looking back now, it was quite clear who would be chosen.

"The decision was written in the stars and Muszaphar was destined to be the first Malaysian astronaut," said Faiz

He was also present on site to watch the launch and lend his moral support to Muszaphar.

"Muszaphar is an excellent candidate and will make an excellent first astronaut for Malaysia.

"It was a good decision but I be-

lieve any one of the two boys would have been a good choice."

Faiz hopes that putting a Malaysian in space, besides proving the "Malaysia Boleh" spirit, would also help further the development of science and technology in the country.

"I hope it will inspire an interest in science among the youths and draw more of them to study aerospace engineering."

Although they did not make the final cut, both Faiz and Vanajah admit that the experience of being considered for the role of being Malaysia's first astronaut is something they would cherish for the rest of their lives.

"Since the selection, I've been receiving numerous invitations to speak at schools, clubs and various organisations.

"It has given me a wonderful chance to motivate girls in our country and boost the confidence of women in Malaysia as well," said Vanajah

She is pursuing a master's degree at Chalmers University of Technology in Gothenburg, Sweden.