

Small step for Malaysia

PM hopes space programme will fire interest of youths

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KUALA LUMPUR: Some 1,800 guests, led by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and his deputy Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak, gathered at the KL Convention Centre to witness Malaysia's mission to the final frontier live on television.

Abdullah called it the first important step in Malaysia's journey of discovery into space.

The experience, he said, was all about surpassing existing boundaries and seeking out new frontiers.

"This programme is also a powerful symbol of the limitless possibilities of science and technology, building bridges that will bring these fields into the imagination of the young people here as it is done elsewhere," Abdullah said in his speech.

Indeed, the night was about firing the imagination of the young ones. Some 30% of the guests were students from primary and secondary

schools and colleges.

Retired American astronaut Captain Robert "Hoot" Gibson, invited as a special guest by Malaysian Institute of Micro Electronics and Semi-conductor (Mimos), said sending a man into space was a powerful way to fire the imagination of the young.

"We have found that the space

programme at Nasa is a wonderful way to motivate folks to be interested in mathematics, science and psychics," said Gibson.

More importantly, he called on the young to believe in their dreams.

The dream for Malaysia and Angkasawan Dr Sheikh Muszaphar Shukor came true at 9.22pm when the Soyuz TMA-11 blasted off.

At KLCC, Abdullah and Najib were up on stage and they looked intently at the telecast of the launch on the giant television screen.

At one point, Abdullah told compere Mahadzir Lokman to announce to the crowd that Malaysia's flag was on the rocket.

The guests clapped and gamely shouted "Malaysiaku Gemilang" when prompted by Mahadzir.

Abdullah joined in, even raising his hand for the final shout.

When the rocket blasted off, all

eyes were glued to the nine giant screens inside and outside the banquet hall.

When the rocket took off successfully, Abdullah and Najib smiled and clapped and the large crowd joined in. The crowd also cheered when the screens showed Dr Sheikh Muszaphar looking intense inside the launching capsule.

At one point when the explanation about the launch became too technical, Abdullah and Najib asked Gibson for an explanation.

Gibson reassured the two leaders the capsule was stable and explained a little about the task ahead.

The other Angkasawan candidates were also given a standing ovation for their efforts.

Abdullah remembered Kapt Faiz Khaleed, sending a *salam* (greeting) to him and hoped he would be the next Malaysian to go to space.