

Foreign media coverage for Muszaphar

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The news of Dr Sheikh Muszaphar Shukor Sheikh Mustapha, becoming the country's first angkasawan in newspapers and websites in China. — Bernama picture

SINGAPORE: The historic blast-off of Malaysia's first astronaut into space yesterday not only made the headlines in the Malaysian media, but also attracted coverage here.

Besides the dailies, the event also made the news on television and radio.

On page 3 of *The Straits Times* was a picture of the rocket blasting off from Kazakhstan's Baikonur cosmodrome.

Under the picture was a report headlined "Blast Off: Malaysians cheer as astronaut Muszaphar flies to space station".

It reported on Malaysians, including Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad

Badawi, watching the live telecast of the event.

"Excited Malaysians also watched at other locations in the (Malaysian) capital, where huge plasma screens were put up to show the live telecast of the blast-off," said the report.

The *Business Times* carried a Reuters picture of Dr Sheikh Muszaphar Shukor in his space suit onboard the spacecraft, with a caption "Malaysia Boleh (Malaysia can) in Space".

The only Malay newspaper in Singapore, *Berita Harian*, carried the story on Page 5 with the title "Angkasawan pertama Malaysia berlepas" (Malaysia's first astronaut blasts off).

Channel News Asia (CNA)

carried a detailed report on the event.

CNA also reported on Dr Muszaphar's mission in space, including conducting experiments on tropical disease microbes and proteins for a potential HIV vaccine.

"He will also study the effects of micro-gravity and space radiation on cancer cells and human genes," it said.

In **Jakarta**, the Indonesian newspapers, with the exception of a few, played down the story.

Only three newspapers carried the news about the Malaysian in space.

The mainstream *Kompas* carried the news merely as a filler on page nine.

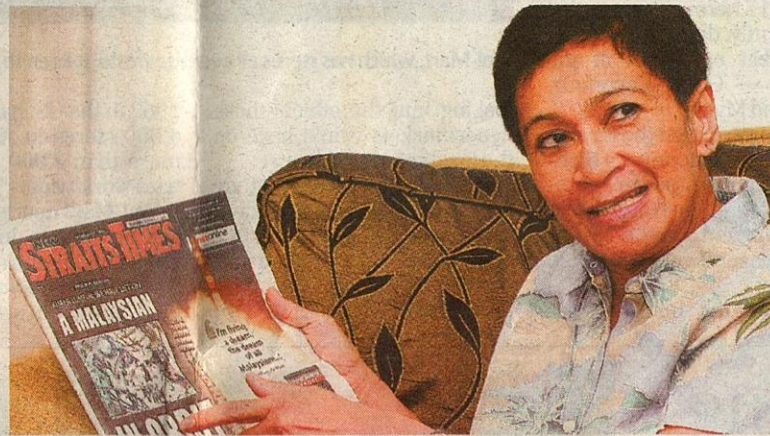
Media Indonesia carried the story under the heading "First Malaysian lifts-off to the Moon" by mentioning the astronaut as the first Asian and a first for Muslims in Asia to do so.

An English daily, *The Jakarta Post* put out the story as the third lead in its World News section with a picture of Dr Muszaphar smiling and pointing his finger to the miniature national flag on the left sleeve of his space costume.

The story under the heading "First Malaysian enters space" which was lifted from Reuters mentioned Dr Muszaphar as the first Muslim to fly into space during the holy month of Ramadan. — Bernama

If we spend money like China, then we can build rockets and go to space very fast. India will also be sending a man to space soon.

Datuk Dr Mazlan Othman



Prof Datuk Dr Mazlan Othman, director-general of National Space Agency, says experiments and research can still continue.

that I had the support of the Planetarium staff. In the first year, I was struggling to come up with a programme to develop our own technology such as satellites, spacecraft and rockets. We needed human capital and facilities. In the last five years, we set up the National Space Centre in Banting to allow Malaysians to build their own satellites. We talked about Measat, Tiongsat and Razaks but these were built overseas. The government has to start a mechanism or create an environment where our engineers and scientists can build our own satellites.

Q: What was the screening process like?

A: With the 10,000 potential candidates, we got them to re-apply and when they did that, the number did not drop. So, the first thing we did was to eliminate those under the age of 21, maybe about 800 of them. We also wanted someone with a university degree, except if they were professional pilots. Because pilots are the best candidates for this. And I thought, if worst comes to worst, we will send a pilot. The number dropped drastically. This was the passive process.

The next step was to get them to run 3.5 km in 20 minutes. But only about 500 were brave enough to go through this. Out of that about half qualified. They also had to undergo a pilot's medical checkup to check their eyesight and hearing. At this point, only 100 qualified. The medical examination became harder from then on. They also had to undergo dental check-ups. Those who had too many fillings were disqualified because when there are too much fillings, it could jeopardise the training. Those who had major fractures were also dropped. From here on, we had other tests including oxygen testing and defying zero gravity.

Q: Are you happy with the candidate chosen to represent Malaysia?

A: We had 10,000 Malaysians who applied and went through nine screening tests.

ment of a radiation patch. We chose those partners because they have strong space programmes. The Japanese are going to launch their own module for scientific experiments. They will be looking for international partners. By doing something for the Japanese now, they will include Malaysians in the future to do more research.

Q: How can those in remote or rural areas relate to the space programme?

A: Even those who do not care about space still care about the country. By putting a man in space, it puts the country in the league of nations of the highest ranking. People may say that we should not be proud as we have not built a rocket. But in order to have a man in space, it means that we have certain capabilities. For instance, the Russians look at us as a viable partner. It means that we have reached a certain level. We have received international recognition.

Q: How did the Angkasawan project start? When did it start and who got the ball rolling?

A: It was in 2002 when the then Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad called me back from Vi-

enna to set up the space agency and asked me what my plans were for Malaysia. At that time, I was curious to know whether we should have an astronaut programme. The reason was because whenever I spoke to the press, they would always ask me why we did not have an astronaut programme since we have a space agency. Most of them equate a space agency to Nasa. But I wasn't too keen on having an astronaut programme because it would cost money and it should not be a top priority as we had other programmes as well. I asked Tun why we needed to have a space programme and he told me that every now and then, a country needed to have a programme which would unite the people. And he thought the space programme would be able to do that. On top of that, it would inspire the young people and would drive the progress of science.

Q: What happened next?

A: We went to the next level on how we would fund the programme and if we could get the right candidate. We were not sure how many would apply. Tun had told me that he had thought of the programme in 1985 but he said we were not ready then but by 2002, we knew we were ready. We had a solid space pro-

gramme already. We had launched two satellites, the Measat I and Measat II, and we had already launched our remote sensing satellite, Tiongsat, in 2000 and ended its life in 2004. We had aerospace engineering programmes. We had the Planetarium and Remote Sensing Centre receiving images. We had enough space-related activities as compared to 1985 when we had nothing. Tun also asked me how many would apply and I told him that maybe about a thousand people would apply. But then about 10,000 people applied. I was wrong, I didn't think it would inspire so many Malaysians.

Q: How did the offset agreement between Malaysia and Russia for the government's purchase of 18 Russian-produced Sukhoi-30MKM jetfighters come about?

A: There were a lot of things happening at the same time. I also got to know from the Defence Ministry that they were looking for an offset programme with Russia. We thought the programme which would cost US\$20 million to send our man to space was very high. So we looked at ways on how we could cut cost. We were very careful not to spend too much because we were not sure of the public's support for the programme. I looked at the offset programme and I thought to my-

self, this is it. We could do the training programme without spending tax payers' money. I met Datuk Seri Najib Razak, who was also the Minister of Defence at the time, and asked him if he would support the Angkasawan programme as one of the offset programmes. He said yes almost immediately and said he would bring it up with the Russians. And that was how the programme started. And when Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi took over in 2004, he was very supportive of the programme. His support is obvious. He is always available when it comes to the Angkasawan programme or any announcement or when the candidates want to meet him or the Russians want to talk to him.

Q: Why was the National Space Agency set up?

A: It was initially set up to coordinate several ministries which were interested in space and communications. It was also set up to plan space regulations, space programmes and space policies.

Q: How many staff were employed at the agency?

A: There were 14 of us. In the first year, there was me, my secretary and driver. We were working with a skeleton staff. But I was fortunate

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