

## She stooped to conquer space

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Article

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EACH year, on Dec 10, scientists will be anxiously waiting for the Nobel Prize ceremony in Stockholm. It is after all deemed as science's most prestigious annual event.

For Malaysia, the date this year took a different significance with the departure of one of the nation's renowned scientists, the head of Angkasa, the National Space Agency.



Prof Datuk Dr Mazlan Othman was instrumental in sending the first Malaysian into space

Professor Datuk Dr Mazlan Othman is reported to have left the country to once again take up appointment as head and director of the United Nations Office for Outer Space Affairs based in Vienna.

In fact, on Oct 21, 1999, she held the same position, appointed by the UN Secretary-General. In 2002, she was recalled by then prime minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad to set up Malaysia's space agency.

The aim was to co-ordinate several Malaysian ministries which were interested in space and communications, and establish space regulations, space programmes and space policies for the nation.

She was in charge of Malaysia's space programme under the Science, Technology and Environment (now Innovation) Ministry, as director-general.

Under her leadership, last October, Malaysia made history through the successful launch into space of the first Malaysian astronaut (angkasawan), Dr Sheikh Muszaphar Shukor.

Indeed, for Mazlan, this was just a matter of time. She had been promoting space science in Malaysia long before with its introduction into the school curriculum.

Only about a decade later did it bear fruit when her efforts gained recognition and resulted in her being seconded to the Prime Minister's Department in December 1990. Already then, she was to direct the design and construction of the National Planetarium, which became fully operational in March 1993.

While at the Prime Minister's Department, she established the nation's Space Science Studies Division. As director-general, she initiated the National Microsatellite Programme, which gave birth to TiungSAT-1, launched in early 2000.

Overall, she was instrumental in putting space science at the forefront by spearheading several initiatives, such as identifying space research and development priorities, formulating space laws and strategising national space policy.

All these, in part, got Malaysians hooked on to the world of space.

When Malaysia decided to undertake an astronaut programme, 10,000 applied to be the first angkasawan. It speaks of the overwhelming enthusiasm for space science — thanks to the vision and consistent efforts by Mazlan and her team.

Within five years, between the setting up of its space agency and sending a person into space, Malaysia has demonstrated its commitment to be among the leaders in space travel and exploration.

Mazlan was quoted as saying: "Not so long ago, only the Russians and Americans could afford to go to space. Now any country can start a space presence for about US\$10 million (RM34 million).

This is a modest budget—technology has improved so much and we can share certain space efforts between countries.

"No country has to be a specialist in absolutely everything—we can pool expertise and budgets across international borders."

This is what she did to put Malaysia on the map for space science.

The lesson not to be missed, however, is that for any science project as large as a space programme to be successful, we not only need the political will and money to make it happen. It takes more of nurturing and awareness among the young and the public as Mazlan had done almost single-handedly with her passion, enthusiasm and conviction.

It is about creativity and innovation. Without this, there will never be an enduring success as we very often discover. In the words of Mazlan: "I believe that space activities are impacting society through creating an awareness that our planet is special but at the same time vulnerable, and uniting the hopes of people around the world that humankind will some day physically explore other worlds."

She also said: "Never do anything that is routine work—break ground with new ideas." True to her word, she is now back to lead an august international body, benefiting her stature and crowning success story for the developing world.

Mazlan will leave a vacuum in the Malaysian scientific community, just when the future of our science is about to reach greater heights. To Mazlan, we must record our profound thanks. We hope she will be back once again to lead us into yet another challenging scientific adventure.

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