

RACE TO SPACE

UAE SEEKS TO BE AN ACTIVE PLAYER IN SPACE ARENA: MBRSC



4,000

Number of total applicants for the UAE Astronauts Programme

60%

Of the astronaut applicants were engineers or scientists

39

Applicants are participating in the final interviews

THE MISSION IN A NUTSHELL

> The UAE is set to have its first astronaut corps of four this year

> One of them will go on their first mission to space in April, 2019

> The mission will take off in Russia on board the Soyuz MS-12 spacecraft

> It will be a 10-day mission > A Russian commander, American and Emirati astronauts will be on board

> The Mohammed bin Rashid Space Centre will add more astronauts to the corps as they achieve a growing number of successful space missions.

> The 39 candidates left after the screening will take their final interviews starting today

> MBRSC's assistant director general Salem Al Marri hopes Emirati youth will be inspired by the mission

The objective of the UAE National Space Programme is to build human capabilities and knowledge, and to focus on peaceful exploration.

Sarwat Nasir

The UAE aims to be an active contributor to the international space community and its missions, a top official at the UAE's space centre said ahead of the selection of the country's first astronaut corps.

Salem Al Marri, assistant director-general of the Mohammed Bin Rashid Space Centre (MBRSC), spoke to *Khaleej Times* on what kind of impact the UAE's space industry will have by sending the first Emirati to space in April next year.

He said the historic achievement will not only make the UAE an active player in the international space community, but, will also help create 'Emirati versions of Elon Musks and Jeff Bezos'. "For me, human space flight is the pinnacle of space exploration. Getting a human into space and then keeping him alive, getting him to work and to interact is not easy and that's why every country doesn't do that and why every country doesn't have astronauts. I think, for us, getting to that level sends a clear message that the country has a long-term commitment to space and its exploration objective," he said.

"The objective of the UAE National Space Programme is to build human capabilities and knowledge, and to focus on peaceful exploration. It also sends a message that the UAE is an active player in space flight and exploration and that we are doing this as part of our global citizen role."

Al Marri hoped that the Emirati children will be inspired by the historic move the UAE will achieve in April next year, when it sends its first astronaut into space. "If we are able to inspire tens of thousands of 10-year-olds to think about technology in space and research, what are those children going to come up with when they are 30 or 40? Going back to the Apollo days, in the 1960s during the moon landing, a lot of innovators whom we

Final interviews of Emirati astronauts to start today

DUBAI — The final interviews for the UAE's first Emirati astronaut corps selection are starting today and one of them will be heading to space early next year on a 10-day mission.

It has been a grueling series of medical tests, psychological exams and interviews since January for 4,000 candidates who dreamt of becoming astronauts. The remaining 39 will be taking part in their final interviews this week and four will be chosen soon as the country's first astronaut corps. One of the final four will head to the International Space Station onboard the Russian Soyuz MS-12 spacecraft in April.

Ahead of the final interviews, Salem Al Marri, assistant director-general of the Mohammed Bin Rashid Space Centre (MBRSC), told *Khaleej Times* that the candidates come from different professions.

"I think if you are looking at the

original numbers we announced previously, 60 per cent were engineers and scientists, mainly these numbers have stayed stable. We have a lot of engineers and scientists. We do also have a good number of pilots — civilian and military. We have people who come from a teaching background and medical background. These candidates have been with us for the past three months and since the 4,000 were announced, we have been assessing them continuously and the numbers are going down and down," he said.

"Whether they have been assessed from a medical or psychological perspective, they've handled the interviews and they're going through another interview as well. There's a lot of information we have built on each individual candidate. Then we start to tailor questions, we start getting concerns or get better clarifi-

cations just to see if this person is the right person to represent the UAE in space. We also check for someone who would be able to work very well in a group, with the rest of the astronauts and in confined and dangerous spaces. These are the type of persons who can work in that field."

The mission to the International Space Station will take off from Russia in April onboard Russia's Soyuz MS-12 spacecraft. Al Marri said that three astronauts will be part of the flight, including an American flight engineer, a Russian commander and an Emirati astronaut.

The names of four Emiratis who will form UAE's first astronaut corps will be announced after the final interviews are completed this month. After that the name of the astronaut who will jet off into space in April will be announced later this year. sarwat@khaleejtimes.com

4 Members of the UAE Astronaut Corps will be selected this year

see in the US today — Jeff Bezos and Elon Musk are two of them — go back to when Neil Armstrong landed on the moon and that is what inspired them," he said.

"We would hope that looking forward 10, 20, or 30 years later, we have our own Jeff Bezos and Elon Musks who are developing industries, those related to space and

others as well. And they can use the first Emirati going to space memory and knowledge as inspiration. I think that's important."

He said the UAE's progress in reaching space and further exploration will help the country advance its space industry, which will also "indirectly boost the economy". "Every dollar that you spend on space will bring you a return of three, four or five dollars, whatever it may be. But, it's not necessary that it's a direct return, it could be an indirect return. The objective here is not to make money or to necessarily support the economy directly, it's more of building knowledge and capabilities and being an active player in space ex-

ploration," he said.

"Along with that, there are research entities that get developed in universities, a lot of joint work that happens and exchange of knowledge, science and researchers from this region to the US and vice versa. A lot of such knowledge generates capabilities and then comes back into the economy indirectly — for example, businesses opening, spin-offs coming out, technologies being developed. And you have a society that's based on knowledge and individuals who can contribute back to the country in many different ways. That's what we see happening with space and innovation." sarwat@khaleejtimes.com

KNOWLEDGE-BUILDING



Salem Al Marri, assistant director-general of the MBRSC

If we are able to inspire tens of thousands of 10-year-olds to think about technology in space and research, what are those children going to come up with when they are 30 or 40?

Imagine if we send an astronaut for six months. You've got someone from the UAE living in space for half a year and every day he's connecting with the community for that 180-day period.

Looking at what the Russians can provide, they offer 50 to 60 years of experience. The Soyuz has been launched over 100 times and it's very safe, no accidents have happened for the past 50 years.

The objective here is not to make money or to necessarily support the economy directly, it's more of building knowledge and capabilities and being an active player in space exploration."

Longer duration space missions, more astronauts on plan



First Emirati astronaut will take off from Russia in April next year onboard Russia's Soyuz MS-12 spacecraft.

Sarwat Nasir

DUBAI — The Mohammed Bin Rashid Space Centre (MBRSC) will start planning longer duration space missions of up to six months once the first one in April is successfully completed, Salem Al Marri, assistant director-general of the centre, has said.

Al Marri told *Khaleej Times* that the 10-day mission at the International Space Station will help the UAE achieve and advance in their scientific objectives, allowing them to explore further and go on longer missions. The agreement to work with Russia's space agency, Roscosmos, was signed last month in Vienna during a convention.

"I think the unique aspect of this mission is that it's a short duration. It's about 10 days. It's great to expe-

rience 10 days in orbit and go through the whole process, learn and build our scientific objective and experiments in that period. After that, we aim for a longer-term mission, where you're talking about a month or six months," he said.

Al Marri said the agreement with Roscosmos was negotiated and prepared much before the convention last month. "Why Russia? Right now, no one other than Russia can send astronauts into space."

Right now, no one other than Russia can send astronauts into space. American astronauts also go on the same spacecraft.

Salem Al Marri, assistant director-general, MBRSC

American astronauts go on the same Soyuz spacecraft. We'll have a Russian commander with us, an American female astronaut and the third one will be an Emirati astronaut. Currently, the only way to get into space is using a Russian rocket. There are obviously options coming forward — SpaceX and Boeing, for example," he said.

"Looking at what the Russians can provide, they offer 50 to 60 years of experience. The Soyuz has been launched over 100 times and it's very safe, no accidents have happened, I think, for the past 50 years. So, it's a reliable and safe work force."

Al Marri said that they plan on adding more astronauts to their corps later on as they carry out more missions into space.

"These four will form our first astronaut corps. They will have ba-

sic and mission-specific trainings over a number of years. We are very lucky that we have been able to secure our first flight next April. However, there will be the next five to 10 years of continuous training for these four. Also, we will be adding additional astronauts to this corps, training them and looking for flight opportunities for longer durations.

"This mission is for 10 days, imagine if we send an astronaut for six months. You've got someone from the UAE living in space for half a year and every day he's connecting with the community, the education sector, with kids and scientists for that 180-day period. I think these kinds of objectives going into the next five or 10 years are very tangible and are objectives that are very important." sarwat@khaleejtimes.com