

The Australian

The UN is to appoint an astrophysicist to be the first contact for any aliens

- Jonathan Leake
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M. OTHMAN !

WHEN aliens arrive on Earth, they will no longer have to worry about who will greet them.

The United Nations, tackling head-on the problem of what to do if an alien says “take me to your leader”, is poised to designate a specific individual for the task.

Some would argue that the job should fall to the US president, the leaders of Russia or the European Union. Others might suggest the Pope. One thing is certain: humanity's lack of a leader would not make a good impression.

Instead the UN is set to select an obscure Malaysian astrophysicist who is head of its little-known Office for Outer Space Affairs (Unoosa).

Mazlan Othman will describe her potential new role next week at a scientific conference at the Royal Society's Kavli conference centre in Buckinghamshire.

She will tell delegates that the recent discovery of hundreds of planets around other stars has made the detection of extraterrestrial life more likely than ever before - and that means the UN must be ready to co-ordinate humanity's response to any “first contact”.

Such ideas seem like science fiction and call to mind the Hollywood blockbuster Men in Black, in which a top-secret agency negotiates with aliens and even lets some take refuge on Earth.

In recent years, however, scientists have become increasingly concerned about how humanity should respond to discovering aliens.

The Sunday Times has obtained a recording of a talk Ms Othman gave recently to fellow scientists in which she said: “The continued search for extraterrestrial communication, by several entities, sustains the hope that some day humankind will receive signals from extraterrestrials. When we do, we should have in place a co-ordinated response that takes into account all the sensitivities related to the subject. The UN is a ready-made mechanism for such co-ordination.”

Othman previously ran Malaysia's national space agency and oversaw the flight of her country's first astronaut.

As director of Unoosa, she has developed policies on issues raised by advances in space technology, such as how humanity should respond to the discovery of asteroids and comets found to be on a collision course with Earth.

The same thinking lies behind her proposals for dealing with the discovery of alien life. Recently NASA announced that its Kepler probe had found more than 700 suspected new planets, including up to 140 similar in size to Earth.

Kepler had studied only 150,000 stars - a fraction of the 100 billion estimated to lie in the Milky Way, Earth's galaxy.

Professor Richard Crowther, an expert in space law and governance at the UK Space Agency and who leads British delegations to the UN on such matters, said: “Othman is absolutely the nearest thing we have to a 'take me to your leader' person.”

However, Professor Crowther thinks humanity's first encounter with any intelligent aliens is more likely to be via radio or light signals from a distant planet than by beings arriving on Earth. And, he suggests, even if we do encounter aliens in the flesh, they are more likely to be microbes than anything intelligent.

“Even a discovery of microbes will have a huge cultural impact on humanity,” he said. “It would alter our sense of our place in the universe - and it raises many important legal and cultural issues that the UN is well placed to deal with.”

Unoosa does have some superficial similarities to the “MiB” agency portrayed in Men in Black. It has bases in Vienna, Bonn and Beijing and a highly skilled multinational staff.

Mr Othman's first job could be to protect aliens from humanity, rather than the reverse. Under the Outer Space Treaty of 1967, which Ms Othman's office oversees, UN members agree to protect Earth against contamination by alien species by “sterilising” them. Ms Othman is understood to want a more tolerant approach.

Her plans to make her department the co-ordinating body for dealing with alien encounters will be debated by UN scientific advisory committees and should eventually reach the body's general assembly.

The UN has tried previously to contact alien life. The two Voyager spacecraft launched in 1977 carried a message from Kurt Waldheim, then secretary-general, saying: “We step out of our solar system into the universe seeking only peace and friendship.”

However, scientists are now embarrassed by Mr Waldheim's deployment as an interstellar envoy because it later emerged that he had been an enthusiastic member of the Nazi party.

Martin Dominik, a St Andrews University astronomer, who organised the conference, said: “Any encounter with alien life would have major consequences and scientists cannot take the political responsibility, so we need the UN to take the lead.”

Professor Stephen Hawking has warned humanity would be making a big mistake if it tried to seek out alien life. “I imagine they might exist in massive ships, having used up all the resources from their home planet,” he said. “The outcome for us would be much as when Christopher Columbus first landed in America, which didn't turn out very well for the native Americans.”

The Sunday Times

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