

Flight into history



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Sheikh Muszaphar set to be first Malaysian in space

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BAIKONUR (Kazakhstan): Hospital UKM's Dr Sheikh Muszaphar Shukor will make history when he goes into space on board the Russian Soyuz TMA-11 spacecraft at 9.21pm (Malaysian time) today.

"It's a small step for me, but a great leap for the Malaysian peo-

ple," Dr Sheikh Muszaphar - the first Malaysian to go into space - told the Associated Press, rephrasing Neil Armstrong's legendary words after the Apollo landing on the moon in 1969.

He will spend 10 days in space, including eight on board the International Space Station (ISS) where

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Hari Raya party to be held on ISS

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he will be part of the ISS Expedition 16 crew.

The TMA-11 craft carrying the 35-year-old doctor and his flight mates - Russian cosmonaut Yuri Malenchenko and American astronaut Peggy Whitson - is scheduled to dock at the ISS at 10.51pm (local time) on Friday.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, Cabinet Ministers and 280 students will watch the live broadcast of the launch at the KL Convention Centre in Kuala Lumpur tonight.

On Sunday, Abdullah will hold a teleconference with Dr Sheikh Muszaphar who will then be on board the ISS.

Another first for the Malaysian Angkasawan is that he will be hosting a Hari Raya party on board the space station on the first day of *Syawal*. He has taken *satay* and some *kuih Raya* to treat the others on board.

At the ISS, he will carry out four experiments drawn up by Malaysian scientists.

Dr Sheikh Muszaphar is to study the effects of microgravity and space radiation on cells and microbes, as well as experiment with proteins for a potential HIV vaccine.

The rocket - adorned with a Malaysian flag and coat of arms and carrying the Soyuz TMA-11 spacecraft - was moved on Monday to the launch pad from its assembly site at the Baikonur Cosmodrome, which Russia rents from Kazakhstan.

Malaysia is paying for the voyage as part of a billion-dollar purchase of Russian fighter jets.

Russia built the cosmodrome on the arid plains of Kazakhstan during Soviet times and has continued to use the site under a rental deal since the 1991 Soviet collapse.

Russia is marking 50 years of space exploration, having celebrated on Oct 4 the 50th anniversary of the launch of the first ever satellite, Sputnik.

Dr Sheikh Muszaphar is to return to Earth on Oct 21 with two Russian members of the current space station crew.

Whitson and Malenchenko will stay on as the station's new crew, and will be joined in October by American astronaut Daniel Tani, who is arriving with the shuttle *Discovery*. Tani will replace fellow American Clayton Anderson, who has been at the station since June.

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