

Blast-off marks historic leap into space

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THE rocket carrying Dr Sheikh Muszaphar Shukor, the nation's first angkasa-wan, lifted off at 9.21pm Malaysian time yesterday carrying the hopes and aspirations of all Malaysians.

In a historic launch marking the start of Malaysia's leap into space, the Soyuz-FG rocket launcher carrying the Soyuz-TMA-11 spacecraft blasted off from here according to schedule.

Travelling at a speed of 8km per second, the rocket shot into the clear evening sky in a flash, leaving a sonic boom in its wake.

There was a visible change of mood among those who witnessed the launch from the viewing point 7km away, the closest permissible distance.

The early silence erupted into cheers immediately after the take-off.

The audible sigh of relief and happy smiles all around marked the mood of those present.

Dr Muszaphar's parents, Datuk Sheikh Mustapha Sheikh Abdul Shukor and Datin Zuraida Sheikh Ahmad, shed tears and raised their hands in prayer and said: "Alhamdulillah" (Thank God) after the lift-off.



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The first two stages of separation — the separation of the rocket's lateral thrusters and the main thrusters — occurred within the first five minutes of the launch. As it left the earth's atmosphere, the rocket achieved zero gravity within the next four minutes and soared into the stratosphere.

At an altitude of 220km above the Earth, the spacecraft carrying Dr Muszaphar, Commander Peggy Whitson and cosmonaut Yuri Malechenko, finally separated from the rocket.

Dr Muszaphar's day began at noon (2pm Malaysian time) yesterday when he, Whitson and Malechenko left the Cosmonaut Hotel.

Despite its name, the Cosmonaut Hotel is not for the public. It is a branch of the Yuri Gagarin Cosmonaut Training Centre in Star City, Moscow, where cosmonauts are quarantined before a launch. The



crew were then transported to launch Pad One at the Baikonur Cosmodrome.

At 3pm (5pm Malaysian time), the crew put on their custom-made Sokol space suit and took part in a full military ceremony.

They shook hands with guests including the Prime Minister of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev, Roskosmos (Russian Space Agency) director-general Permivov Anatoli Nikolaevich and Malaysian ambassador to Russia Datuk Mohamad Khalis Ali Hassan.

With the launch, so began the crew's two-day journey to the International Space Station, a research facility orbiting the earth at an average altitude of 360km.

Throughout the next 48 hours, Dr Muszaphar, Whitson and Malechenko will be strapped in their custom-made seats in the orbital module, one of the three components of the spacecraft.

The spacecraft will dock with the ISS tomorrow.

Dr Muszaphar will remain on the ISS for nine days and conduct experiments.

The crew will leave the ISS on Oct 21 and return to earth within 2½ hours of undocking.

For the landing procedure, the crew will stay in the descending module and land in Kazakhstan, where they will be met by a recovery team in helicopters.



The international space crew members (from top) Dr Sheikh Muszaphar Shukor, Peggy Whitson and Yury Malenchenko wave before boarding at the Baikonur Cosmodrome in Kazakhstan yesterday. — AFP picture

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