

M'sian a full-fledged cosmonaut, says ex-astronaut

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KUALA LUMPUR: Malaysia's first Angkasawan Dr Sheikh Muszaphar Shukor is a bona fide cosmonaut and not a space flight participant as earlier suggested, a former American shuttle astronaut said.

Captain Robert "Hoot" Gibson said he regarded Dr Sheikh Muszaphar as a peer.

"The Russians trained him for a year and he is eminently qualified to function as a cosmonaut or an astronaut. He should be called one," Gibson said at the KL Convention Centre yesterday just before the launch of the Soyuz TMA-11 in Baikonur, Kazakhstan.

There were earlier reports that Nasa had referred to Dr Sheikh Muszaphar as a "space flight participant", a term reserved for space tourists.

However, Russian Ambassador to Malaysia Alexander Karchava refuted that suggestion and said he was a full-fledged cosmonaut.

Gibson, who has been up to space five times in his 18 years as an astronaut, said "this is going to be something he (Dr Sheikh Muszaphar) will remember for the rest of his life."

"About 40 seconds before lift-off, things start to get busy. The internal power goes on, electrical power is closed off from the launch pad, and

the last umbilical connection is removed at about 20 seconds to go.

"The engine starts to light and prior to lift-off, it will come up to full power. It will be a deafening roar from where he's sitting, and it will be hard to even hear himself think," he said.

"He will be pushed back into his seat at greater than the force of gravity - about 1.4 times the force of gravity - and he'll be riding the rocket for the next nine minutes before he reaches orbit," he said.

Gibson added that the Soyuz would be circling earth 16 times every 24 hours.

"That means 16 sunrises and 16 sunsets. In the space of 90 minutes, he'll be spending 45 minutes in the daylight, and 45 minutes in the dark," he said.

He added that it would be a very emotional time for every first-timer up in space.

"You are fairly well-trained but you are not necessarily prepared for the emotional response you're going to feel," he said.

Gibson said Dr Sheikh Muszaphar would have another experience of a lifetime when he re-enters Earth.

"And the trouble with it is that he's going to come back and say, 'I want to go again'," he added.



Saying goodbye: (From top) Dr Sheikh Muszaphar, Peggy Whitson of the United States and Yury Malenchenko of Russia waving just before entering the Soyuz rocket at the Baikonur cosmodrome in Kazakhstan yesterday. — AP