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Angkasawan's journey a defining moment: PM

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by **Maria J. Dass**
newsdesk@thesundaily.com

KUALA LUMPUR: The prime minister yesterday described Malaysia's first *angkasawan's* journey to space as a "defining moment" that should renew the nation's drive in the field of science over the next 50 years.

Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi said this is precisely what the government is hoping for - that this event will inspire Malaysians and give them a new confidence and strong belief in their own capabilities.

"This defining moment when Malaysia's first *angkasawan* travelled into space - marking 50 years of our independence - should serve to renew our drive and inspire our efforts in building and advancing Malaysia, especially in the field of science over the next half century," he said.

Abdullah said 50 years of space exploration have engendered scientific breakthroughs in many fields.

"These same technologies have since found practical applications, spawning new industries and creating substantial economic values. In this regard, Malaysia's aspirations are like-minded," he said.

He said Malaysia's objective here is to build and innovate on the technological and scientific knowledge to further national interest.

He said the advanced experimentation carried out by our *angkasawan* is aimed at stimulating Malaysia's scientific community, pushing them to surpass existing boundaries and seek out new frontiers.

"This journey will allow our children to think that dreams can be realised," Abdullah said, in wishing *angkasawan* Dr Sheikh Muszaphar Shukor a safe journey from Baikonur.

"We hope to welcome Dr Sheikh Muszaphar home with renewed confidence and with a greater national consciousness focused on developing a nation of distinction."

Abdullah said this during *albuka puasa* gathering at the Kuala Lumpur Convention Centre prior to the launch of the Russian Soyuz TMA-11 spacecraft.

Later when asked by the press if Malaysians can look forward to another such mission to space soon, he said: "If there is an offer (to go on future Soyuz and International Space Station missions) then we will consider."

Asked if the government is prepared to allocate funds for such missions if there is no offer, he said: "Money has already been put in for this mission and we already have set aside allocations specially for space research and development."

Speaking to reporters after the launching ceremony, Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Sri Najib Abdul Razak said: "This is a great achievement and success for the country as it shows that we have citizens who are qualified and have the mental, physical and psychological capabilities (to be a part of a space mission)."

This success also shows that we are ready to face new challenges in the future as we head towards becoming a developed nation, he said.

Najib said most importantly this feat is a great morale booster to the younger generation as it will give them the confidence to succeed

in their endeavours.

About 1,200 people, from school and university students to corporate and public sector leaders, had gathered to witness the launch with Abdullah. Six giant screens were installed at the KLCC.

The Russian Space Agency (Roskosmos) picked the 35-year-old orthopaedic surgeon as the one to undertake the historic journey. He will spend 10 days in space, including eight on board the ISS.

Sheikh Muszaphar is part of the ISS Expedition 16 crew alongside Russian cosmonaut Yury Malenchenko and US astronaut Peggy Whitson.

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

The TMA-11 craft is scheduled to dock at the ISS at 10.51pm (Malaysian time) on Friday.