

Ramadan brings communities together



**BRIAN
MCFEETERS**

THIS year, Ramadan brings with it an added sense of celebration as Malaysia reopens for the first time since the pandemic began — many families can finally reunite and more bazaars are open.

We are grateful for Malaysia's vaccination campaign, one of the most rapid and successful in the world, and we have been honoured to play a part in Malaysia's fight against Covid-19.

The hardships we've faced during the pandemic have underscored the spirit of Ramadan as a time for Muslims and non-Muslims to join together in the face of adversity.

Ramadan is a time for compassion, self-reflection and generosity. And the Covid-19 pandemic has brought all of this to the fore. Even during movement control orders and other restrictions necessary to control the pandemic, people found ways to come to-

gether to observe Ramadan safely.

As a newly appointed ambassador last year, I was humbled to host Masjid Jamek's Imam Besar Ustaz Haji Yahya Mahyuddin for buka puasa at my residence with several other Muslim guests and to hear him perform the *azan* to mark the breaking of the fast.

Later, I joined the imam for *buka puasa* for the homeless at Masjid Jamek. This year, I'm looking forward to hosting several majlis *berbuka puasa*.

In keeping with the tradition of commitment to service, we are focusing a number of *iftar* on the issues of the environment and women's empowerment.

As we observe Ramadan, I am also reminded of the millions of Muslims observing Ramadan across the United States. They reflect the diversity of our country and the respect we have for pluralism.

American Muslims, including many serving here at the US embassy, host numerous interfaith *iftar* for non-Muslim friends and neighbours, where they open their homes and share their traditions.

People from all over the world who visit and live in the US — be they students, travellers or immigrants — also observe Ra-

madan.

A highlight of Ramadan for us at the embassy every year is finding out how the thousands of Malaysian students studying in the US are observing this holy month.

From New York City to Wyoming, they are breaking fast with fellow Muslims in the US and introducing American host families from Colorado to Ohio to Ramadan traditions.

Recently, Ariana, a Malaysian exchange student in Clearfield, Pennsylvania, shared how her host parents and close friends have been fasting with her.

More Malaysian exchange students will share their Ramadan experiences in the US on the Instagram accounts of the US embassy here and Education USA.

I cannot wait to hear more stories about how they are observing Ramadan, celebrating Hari Raya and connecting with Americans across the US.

The observation of Ramadan in the US has a long history. The first White House *iftar* was held more than 200 years ago by one of the founders of the US and our third president, Thomas Jefferson.

Jefferson had also purchased a Quran for his personal library, and the Quran was one of the first



People have found ways to come together to observe Ramadan safely amid the pandemic.
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books in the US Library of Congress.

From the earliest days of our nation, courageous people from every part of the world have come to the US in search of religious liberty, risking everything to flee the persecution they faced for their beliefs.

Freedom of religion is enshrined in our Constitution's First Amendment, as well as in Malaysia's Federal Constitution and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Around the globe, people are subject to horrifying persecution for their faith and beliefs. There are Muslims around the world who are forced to observe Ramadan under repression, detention and grave humanitarian crises.

We continue to call for all governments to respect freedom of religion or belief.

During this month, a sacred time for Muslims around the

world, I also reflect on and celebrate religious freedom and the commitment to advance mutual respect and understanding in both our countries.

In my first year in Malaysia as ambassador, I've had the honour of visiting houses of worship of different faiths — Masjid Negara, Sin Sze Si Sze Ya Temple, Sri Maha Mariamman Temple, Seri Jayanti Buddhist Temple, Gurdwara Sahib Sentul, as well as many others around the country.

It is amazing to see so many places of worship all coexisting within steps and minutes of each other. There is value in having mutual respect and understanding among all religions.

On behalf of US embassy Kuala Lumpur, I wish all Malaysians of the Muslim faith a blessed Ramadan. Ramadan Kareem.

The writer is the United States ambassador to Malaysia