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FACE  
TO FACE

# US envoy marks KL return with dose of goodwill

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SINCE being posted earlier this year as US Ambassador to Malaysia, Brian McFeeters has been confined mainly to the capital city and Selangor with the various movement control orders in place.

This is his second tour of duty here, having travelled across most of the country as political counsellor at the US Embassy from 2009 to 2011.

Accompanied by wife Melanie and youngest daughter Sara, the memories came flooding back to him when the plane touched down at the KL International Airport on Feb 26.

"Malaysia was a great assignment for my family and me the first time we were here. One of my daughters finished high school here and my other kids went to school here.

"There are many pretty sites here and we love the food and culture. Many members of our extended family visited us and got to know Malaysia," says the father of three.

McFeeters' previous posting was as deputy chief of mission in Iraq where he also chalked up two stints.

"In many ways it was a very satisfying experience because we have a large, dedicated US military force there and on the embassy side, there is a large group of very patriotic people trying to do good things.

"I'm glad I did it and have a lot of pride with the people I served with. But it's not an easy place to make progress," he recalls.

In a virtual interview with *Sunday Star*, the good-natured envoy speaks of his trip down memory lane as the United States' chief diplomat, and what he describes as the most satisfying day in his 30-year Foreign Service career.

**> You must be yearning to see more of Malaysia. I heard that you have only been able to visit Penang, virtually!**

(Laughs) That's right. I've had an excellent series of virtual visits to Penang and just had a conversation with Chief Minister Chow (Kon Yeow). There has been a very good culmination of a number of engagements there. We have new companies and new investments up there. It's exciting to see pictures of them breaking ground. I had a very good cultural visit with some former participants of our exchange programmes. They gave me a virtual tour of Penang and taught me a lot, even though I have been up there before. That's not as good as going in the physical sense but it is good to keep up with an important state like Penang. Until we can travel physically, I hope to be able to keep in touch with other parts of Malaysia this way. I've never been as far up as Perlis, it would be fun to go up there.

**> How much of your work been affected by the various MCOs imposed here?**

We have been very careful to comply with the MCO. At the embassy we have reduced staff and a facemask policy, except when you are in a room alone. It has been more difficult for people to come in and out of the country, enduring the quarantine has been

In an online interview with *Sunday Star*, US Ambassador to Malaysia Brian McFeeters reminisces about his previous stint here while looking forward to the time when he will be able to visit other parts of Malaysia again.



**Taking it in his stride:** Being confined in the Klang Valley by the Covid-19 pandemic has been challenging but it has not stopped McFeeters from fostering meaningful engagements on the ground.

difficult especially for families. That said, we recognise the priority of Covid-19. It's the No 1 issue for us at the embassy and we are doing all we can.

**> Do you have to work from home some days?**

I've mostly been working from the embassy. I do have a complete office at home and I can do that as well. But I find it useful to be in the embassy. We have a core group of people that changes everyday (at the embassy). But I usually work from the office.

**> It was terrific to see you at the tarmac with Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Hishammuddin Hussein and National Covid-19 Immunisation Programme coordinating minister Khairy Jamaluddin welcoming the arrival of a million doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine. It was the best piece of news over a while in Malaysia!**

(Smiles). It was the best day for us as an embassy. As an ambassador, I can't think of a better event to participate in. There was tremendous cooperation with the Malaysian government leading to that contribution. There was a lot of technical work that had to go on in terms of where exactly the vaccines were coming from, how to get it here and how you maintain the cold chain. So we had a huge team at the embassy working with

a large team from the Malaysian side. And it was probably the most satisfying day of my career.

**> Can we expect to get more vaccines from the US?**

I personally hope so but we just don't know. The US has put itself out as the international leader pledging to provide 500 million doses of vaccine through COVAX (Covid-19 Vaccines Global Access) by the first quarter of next year. I don't know what the possibilities are for further contributions to Malaysia. But we have a broad-based effort. Every time we have a staff meeting, we start by talking about Covid and how we can help. And there are some other possibilities. We provided PPE equipment through IndoPacom (Indo-Pacific Command) which has some special community funds and we're looking at other possibilities along those lines. So Covid is No. 1 for us.

**> The big debate here is that Covid policy must take into account economic realities. Amcham (American Malaysian Chamber of Commerce) was gravely concerned with the implementation of the enhanced MCO in Selangor and Kuala Lumpur. From the US point of view, is Malaysia on the right track?**

We've been working closely with Amcham and the companies. We

were delighted with the announcement that some of the critical companies are allowed to operate again in Selangor. The point we've made all along in both our conversations with the companies and the ministers is that we only want the American companies to operate if they are fully compliant in terms of the SOP, frequent testing of their employees and respecting all the rules that the Malaysian authorities have put on. Under those conditions we want the companies to be able to produce, not with any kind of exception to the rules.

**> How are US companies in Malaysia faring at this time? Is there any specific issue raised by them?**

The ability to operate is critical for them. They lose a lot of money every day that they have to shut down and it takes two to three days to turn the assembly lines back on. So being able to operate is their main concern. But they have taken leadership steps in terms of vaccinating their employees and providing frequent testing, PPE equipment and also cleaning their facilities. Sometimes they have a general issue, beyond Covid-19. The predictability and implementation of regulations in Malaysia, sometimes they think it is a bit hard to understand and they want to have more input, so we work with them on that as well.

**> The US has its own problems on the pandemic front. The heavily promoted White House goal of getting seven in 10 adults their first shot by Independence Day has narrowly failed. And when it comes to full vaccinations, only 46% of Americans have taken the two doses. Why is that so?**

The US is facing challenges like Malaysia is in terms of getting vaccines out. The production of vaccines, the vaccination centres, it is a tremendous logistical challenge. That said, when the Biden administration took office, they had a particular goal of 100 million doses in the first 100 days and they got there in about 56 days. So the pace has been impressive. There is a sense of life getting somewhat back to normal because so many people have been vaccinated. But we have a long way to go and the variants are an additional concern, so we are not finished yet.

**> The big question is, will Malaysians who have received other than the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine be allowed to travel to the US?**

There is no requirement for a vaccine to travel to the US. Current US regulations state that all airline passengers to the US ages two years and older must provide a negative Covid-19 viral test taken within three calendar days of travel. Alternatively, travellers to



**A great day:** McFeeters (from left) with Hishammuddin and Khairy at the Sultan Abdul Aziz Shah Airport in Subang to welcome the arrival of a million doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine donated to Malaysia by the US.

the US may provide documentation from a licensed health care provider of having recovered from Covid-19 in the 90 days preceding travel. All air passengers traveling to the US, regardless of vaccination or antibody status, are required to provide a negative Covid-19 test result or documentation of recovery. Some airlines may have additional requirements, so check your airline's Covid-19 requirements prior to traveling.

**> Your predecessor oversaw the fall of the Barisan Nasional government, the rise and fall of Pakatan Harapan and then Perikatan Nasional taking power. The rumblings on the ground are there again. What do you make of the political power play going on in Malaysia?**

We read the news and try to understand it like many Malaysians or other foreigners here. We don't take a particular stance on what should happen or when it should happen. What we try to do is preserve the many lines of effort we have with the ministers you've mentioned earlier. We have about 100 US direct hire staff members at the embassy and about 200 Malaysians and we have efforts across the board that in many ways, are not really affected by the highest level of Malaysian politics. So we just proceed with our priorities of education exchange, law enforcement cooperation and focus on trafficking of persons.

**> Datuk Seri Hishammuddin is now Senior Minister in charge of the security cluster and will assist the Prime Minister with the National Recovery Plan. How do you see his elevation?**

We are waiting to learn how that's going to work. We have excellent relations with the Foreign Ministry, compared to 10 years ago it's much better. We used to not have that closer relationship. I would expect that to continue. Someone like Minister Hishammuddin was already busy and now he's going to be even busier. Hopefully, he'll have people

around him who can help with all those duties.

**> Malaysia has been downgraded from the Tier Two watchlist to Tier 3, the lowest ranking in the State Department's closely watched annual report on human trafficking. What was the main reason for this?**

The rules of the Trafficking Victims Protection Act states that a nation can only stay on Tier 2 watchlist for three years, and then it has to either move up to Tier 2 or move down to Tier 3. We had to make a judgment in collaboration with our colleagues in Washington on the state of efforts in Malaysia. We concluded that Malaysia had not made sufficient efforts, even though there are excellent plans, they haven't had the implementation, in our view, on the three big areas – preventing trafficking, protecting victims and prosecuting those who carry out trafficking crimes. That said, we are working closely with the Malaysian government on the next steps. We have had discussions with the Home Minister, members of his staff and Mapo (Anti-Trafficking in Persons and Anti-Smuggling of Migrants Council). There are a number of areas where we can provide assistance, such as how do you identify victims better, how do you make sure that victims have interpreters so that they can go to court and tell their story in their own language. It is an area where the US also has work to do and we recognise that it is a global problem.

**> How long will Malaysia remain in Tier 3, and will US aid to Malaysia be affected?**

That depends on implementation. Every year there is a date-centric report, about what actually has been done, how many victims have been identified, how many alleged traffickers have been prosecuted. It very much depends on how Malaysia implements the requirements. On aid, there are things that need to be worked through. There is potential impact on aid. We are in conversation with Washington the next steps.

So we don't know how that will come out.

**> The US English Teaching Assistants (ETA) programme ended abruptly in March last year due to the pandemic. Is Malaysia keen to resume the programme, do you have a counter proposal?**

The ETA was active when I was here 10 years ago. It has led a lot of Malaysians to learn better English which is the main focus. It has also been good for the young US college graduates, most of whom had no knowledge about Malaysia before they got here. They will remember Malaysia for the rest of their lives. So we think it is a beneficial programme. We understand the Education Ministry has concerns about the programme and we are continuing to talk to them. We will be delighted if there is some ability to restart the programme, of course, after Covid.

**> How are Malaysian students keeping in the US?**

We have about 7,000 Malaysians studying in the US. It is priority for the embassy for those numbers to go up. It's been higher in the past. If you are a Malaysian student considering studying in the US, you can get a visa. There is a website my.embassy.gov where you can get all the full information. You can also find out about all the opportunities in the US just by googling Education USA where you can research our universities. If I could only do one thing, it would be increasing education exchanges. Apart from college level, we also have a number of other education related programmes. One of my favourites is the YES (Youth Exchange and Study) programme where we send high school students to the US to live with a family for six months. It's good for the family and good for the student. This has been suspended due to Covid and we hope to resume that.

Watch the video  
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