

A special gift for homecoming

By Maria Samad

PHOTOJOURNALIST Robin Adshead, 55, regards Malaysia as home.

As a British army officer, he served in Malaya during the Emergency and later as an army pilot flying helicopters in Peninsular Malaysia and Sarawak during the Confrontation in the early 1960s.

After his career in the army, he became a photojournalist. But he wanted to return to Malaysia to see the changes that had taken place during his long absence.

He also wanted to make a personal contribution to the country which had given him so much by way of experience. So, why not write a book?

After all, Malaysia is preparing for Visit Malaysia next year and for the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM).

"These two events would provide me the opportunity to come back to Malaysia after 22 years. After all I am part of your history," he says.

When Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad went to London early this year, Mr Adshead thought it would be a good idea to interview the Prime Minister, for a start.

The interview was originally meant for a magazine article. But he had never interviewed a politician as he distrusts most of them — a "hangover from an old job."

Besides, he had heard that the Western press had never been too kind to Dr Mahathir.

But to his surprise, he found the Malaysian Prime Minister to be a different person than that portrayed by the Western media.

"For the first time, I found somebody whom I took an instant liking to, someone I think is honest and sincere.

"As I talked to him, I realised that it should not be a magazine article. There was so much to write on him. It would have been a waste.

"The only answer was to write a book. And the book: *Mahathir of Malaysia: Statesman and Leader*, will be launched tomorrow by Dewan Rakyat Speaker Tan Sri Zahir Ismail."

Mr Adshead's book charts Dr Mahathir's early life, from radical student politics through medical school and into the political mainstream of the nation.

He says like all great men, Dr Mahathir has had his critics, even enemies, but his moral courage and conviction has seen him through even the darkest hours.

The book, Mr Adshead says, is not about politics. Neither is it about a politician. It is about a leader dedicated since his childhood to serving his country.

The book details the influences in Dr Mahathir's life that have made him into what Mr Adshead says "the steadfast leader and international statesman he is today."

The book opens a window into Dr Mahathir's private life, his thoughts, his vision of what the country should be as a nation.

-It emphasises Dr Mahathir's view of things.

'He says that Dr Mahathir has been wrongly portrayed as a dictator. This, he says, is a totally wrong impression of the person, whom he thinks is basically, shy, unassum-

ing, sincere and honest.

"All you need is for someone to say that he is a dictator and for someone else to agree. And this will perpetuate the myth," he says.

"I find the Prime Minister to be a man of vision, well ahead of his time, preparing his nation to meet the challenges of the 21st century, and who has very firm ideas as to where Malaysia should be in the world."

"He is the first politician I've ever met whom I would trust — even with my wallet, a leader I've grown to admire," says Mr Adshead.

In the course of writing the book, he had several interviews with the Prime Minister in London and Kuala Lumpur.

If Dr Mahathir had a tight schedule, Mr Adshead would submit a list of questions for Dr Mahathir to answer.

"He answered all of them meticulously. Answered straight questions with straight answers."

Controversial

To get an insight into the man, he interviewed several of Dr Mahathir's school "chums" and his political adversaries.

"Even Datuk Musa Hitam has very complimentary things to say about Dr Mahathir," he says.

"The bottom line is, a country doctor who has served in a small town in Kedah for more than 20 years cannot be anything but honest."

Mr Adshead believes that Dr Mahathir is doing the right things and prescribing the right medicine for the country.

"The patient often does not like the medicine prescribed by his doctor, although it is to make him well."

Mr Adshead says that he had wanted to write about former Malaysian Prime Ministers but his work in London had prevented him from doing that.

After an absence of 22 years, Mr Adshead thought he was returning to the same country which he left.

"There have been a lot of

changes. Anybody who comes back thinking it is going to be the same is in for a pleasant surprise," he says.

The country has made tremendous progress, he said.

"There is sense of nationhood, of having a place in the world — not a colonial backwater.

"When I was here, The Merlin was the best hotel in town, and Batu Road was the only thoroughfare. Now I get lost just walking about.

"The people seem more sure of themselves and take pride in being Malaysians."

Of his book he says: "I hope that people who have had no chance of meeting Dr Mahathir should read it so that they can learn a little bit more about one of the world's statesmen."

Mr Adshead says that his book is not a controversial political book.

"When you take eight hours to transcribe an interview, you will begin to understand the man."

"Dr Mahathir is controversial only in his own country because his own people have failed to understand him."

Born in London, Mr Adshead was educated at Eton and the Royal Military Academy in Sandhurst. He was commissioned into the Sixth Gurkha Rifles in 1954 and served in Malaya in jungle operations against the communist terrorists during the last years of the Emergency.

As a British army pilot, he flew aeroplanes in Europe, North Africa and Cyprus with the Parachute Brigade and the United Nations. He commanded a helicopter unit in Malaysia during the Confrontation, stationed in Kuang.

Mr Adshead retired from the British army in 1971 and has since been a photojournalist specialising in defence, aviation, travel and international affairs.

In 1973, he was runner-up in the Rothmans News Photographer of the Year.

The book is his first biography. It will be distributed by Berita Publishing Sdn Bhd.