

Keeping pace with the Prime Minister

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By Ahmad A. Talib

TWO teznaged Orang Asli girls walked up to a reporter and demanded he takes them to meet the day's guest-of-honour, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

This was about two weeks ago at the Kedah Orang Asli regroupment scheme in the jungles of south Pahang. The girls were just two of many others who had stood in line to shake hands with the PM who had come to visit the scheme.

The scene was repeated just before lunch but this time the crowd was bigger and definitely more enthusiastic. Mothers carrying their babies and fathers holding up their sons competed with teenagers and village elders to get as close to the PM as possible.

It was almost 30 degrees Celsius in the shade, but Dr Mahathir, cool in his grey bush jacket, was unruffled by all the activity.

To him, shaking the *rakyat's* hand was just as important as keying into the latest economic statistics, or getting the vibes or mood of things on the ground.

To the cameramen, the handshakes mean a good picture possibility. To the newsmen, however, this delayed the Press conference at the end of each State visit.

But such was the PM's schedule in all his trips that only the fittest could match him for pace and resilience. If one's exercise routine is confined to winding one's wristwatch, then one should think again before accompanying the PM on his tour.

Once, in Kapar, Selangor, several thousand people crowded around him, delaying his journey home. All they wanted was a handshake, mutter a word

of greeting and smile.

The handshakes did not cease, as did the encouraging words spurring the PM on in his daily routine of administering the country. In a July meet-the-*rakyat* session at Pasir Gudang, Johor, a father carried his son shoulder high so that he could get a closer look at the Prime Minister.

Where does the PM get so much energy? Would he not get tired from all the walking and talking? A colleague asked him once whether the visits have affected his health in any way.

The PM said that he's quite used to such hard work. Furthermore, he has his own doctor on tow during most of these trips! He meant Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohamed Ali, his wife.

For good measure, there's always Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik, the MCA president who is Transport Minister, and Datuk Seri Dr Lim Keng Yalk, the Gerakan boss who is Primary Industries Minister. Datuk Seri Dr Lim prides himself on being *doktor cucuk* (the injection doctor), an encouraging title indeed!

The PM's routine during these visits varies from State to State. Most of them start with a motorcade from the airport preceded by several hundred motorcyclists comprising Barisan Nasional supporters and party workers.

This will usually be followed by an address during the meet-the-*rakyat* sessions or an address at a closed-door meeting with party supporters.

The PM wants a lot of things done his way, including delivering his speech under the scorching sun. His reason is simple — if the *rakyat* could stand

under the hot sun to hear him speak, why should he hide in the shade?

Some officials have confided that they feel the strain of such State visits, where the PM's activities are not just confined to making speeches and giving out awards or presenting certificates.

True that the PM has a host of officials to work out the logistics and other arrangements. But addressing different crowd, responding to questions from party leaders, listening to the grievances of ordinary

members and responding to Press queries at make-shift Press conferences can be taxing.

Such a tiring schedule could exhaust most politicians. But for the Prime Minister, the adrenalin keeps flowing when he faces his *rakyat* because he's very much in his element. In any case, the man's at work, and it shows that he's enjoying every minute of it.

It's no secret that one rarely feels the strain when one enjoys one's work.

Even his speeches reflect this. Addressing a crowd of 5,000 or more can be tiring sometimes, especially when one has to stress the same point but at different locations.

But the driving force for the PM in all these speeches is that the message has to be conveyed, come rain or shine.

Last Thursday, the Prime Minister took to the road again. This time, he went home to his constituency in Kubang Pasu, Kedah. This marked the

start of his third round of visits in the State.

True to form, he was just as busy. In the two-day visit, the PM made five speeches, two of them under the scorching sun. He was very much at home as he mingled with his crowd, listening to their opinion and comments.

But then Dr Mahathir was trained to be a doctor, and who else but a good doctor could listen to everyone's complaints and dispense either appropriate advice or bitter medicine.