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Audience with Emperor and Empress for PM, wife

Azmi M. Anshar in Tokyo

PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and his wife Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohamed Ali had an audience with Emperor Akihito and Empress Michiko at the Akasaka Palace yesterday.

The Prime Minister and his wife were also feted to lunch by the Emperor and Empress.

Almost 13 years ago, Dr Mahathir, three years into his administration, made his first official visit to Japan, then under the reign of the late Emperor Hirohito.

Dr Mahathir remembered that trip well. "The visit inspired me to initiate our Look East Policy," he said.

Speaking yesterday at a banquet held in his honour by Japanese Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto at the latter's official residence, Dr Mahathir said the Look East Policy has served in many ways to strengthen the foundation of Malaysia's bilateral relations with Japan.

Before meeting the Emperor and Empress, Dr Mahathir and Dr Siti Hasmah were accorded a brief but elaborate ceremonial welcome at Akasaka Guest Palace in central Tokyo.

The timing of Dr Mahathir's arrival at the palace coincided with the start of the Diet, the Japanese Parliament, at 8.20am Malaysian time.

At the Guest Palace, the Prime Minister and his wife were accompanied by Hashimoto and his wife, Kumiko, and greeted by some members of the Malaysian Cabinet and the entire Japanese Cabinet.

Also present at the ceremony were Foreign Minister Datuk Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, Transport Minister Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik, International Trade and Industry Minister Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz, Johor Menteri Besar Datuk Ghani Othman, Pahang Menteri Besar Tan Sri Khalil Yaakob and senior Government officials.

The Prime Minister and his delegation were greeted by flag-waving Malaysian students studying in various universities in Tokyo. Also greeting them were children and their teachers from nearby primary schools.

During the ceremony, Dr Mahathir inspected a 93-member guard-of-honour from Japan's Ministry of Defence.

At Akasaka Palace just before meeting the Emperor and Empress, Dr Mahathir and his entourage were greeted by the palace's Master of Grand Ceremonies Yoshio Karita.

After the audience with the Emperor and Empress, the primary business of Dr Mahathir's visit got under way at the Imperial Hotel.

At the same banquet, Hashimoto was impressed with Dr Mahathir's knowledge of Japanese traditional culture and spirit, especially after Dr Mahathir chaired a Cabinet meeting last month in a Japanese-style tea room to experience an authentic cha-no-yu tea ceremony.

"I am always impressed," he said, "by the depth of your knowledge and understanding of Japanese traditional culture and spirit."

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