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Siti Hasmah gets centre stage to launch the Aman Sendai

Azmi M. Anshar in Nagoya

PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad wrapped up his five-day official visit to Japan by giving his wife Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohamed Ali centre stage - to name a liquefied natural gas carrier.

On a cold day when the rain set in, a feeling of warmth embraced the Malaysian delegation as Dr Siti Hasmah swung a small axe that cut the rope to trigger the release of a canvas that hid the ship's name - Aman Sendai - and a bottle of blessed water that shattered against the ship's hull.

The elaborate ceremony of naming Hull No S-150 was held at Wharf Three of the NKK Tsu Works, a shipyard, located about two hours drive from Nagoya where the ship was built.

As guests applauded, hundreds of colourful balloons and confetti were released from inside a sphere while fireworks rocked the grey skies.

Meantime, Dr Mahathir stepped back a few paces and snapped with a camera the whole ceremony from what is the best vantage point, a position envied by every still and video cameraman present.

The blessing of the ship completed and the obligatory doa selamat recited, Dr Mahathir, accompanied by his son Mirzan and a large section of the Malaysian delegation, toured the vessel commissioned by Asia LNG Transport Sdn Bhd.

Dr Mahathir spent most of his time on board on the ship's bridge, getting a briefing from Asia LNG Transport general manager Rahim Idris and its LNG division manager Rasol Puteh.

Also present at the ceremony were Malaysian Ambassador to Japan Tan Sri Muhammad Khatib Abdul Hamid, the Japanese Chief of Protocol Kunisada Kume and Petronas president and chief executive officer Datuk Hassan Merican.

Others included Sendai mayor Hajimu Fujii, Konsortium Perkapalan Bhd group executive chairman Mirzan Mahathir, NKK Corporation president Shunkichi Miyoshi, NYK Line president Kentaro Kawamura and various representatives of LNG-related concerns from Malaysia and Japan.

The Aman Sendai which will commence service in May will help propel Asia LNG Transport, a joint venture company between PNSL Bhd (a wholly-owned subsidiary of Konsortium Perkapalan) and Nippon Yusen Kabushiki Kaisha (a subsidiary of NYK Line), further ahead in owning the 18,800 cubic-metre class LNG carriers.

The Aman Sendai is expected to transport liquefied natural gas for Malaysia LNG Sdn Bhd from Bintulu to the receiving terminal at Port Shiyogama in Sendai for the next 20 years.

Details like the ship's course were not released by Asia LNG Transport.

Earlier while still in Fukuoka, Dr Mahathir and Dr Siti Hasmah toured Canal City, a building complex which is touted to be the city's best shopping mall.

After the ship-naming ceremony was over, the Prime Minister and his wife returned home to Malaysia.

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