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Amazed at easy access to PM

Caroline Broder

KUALA LUMPUR, Tues. - He is not their Prime Minister or President. But that did not stop an endless carousel of foreigners from filling Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's residence, enduring long lines to get a brief handshake and smile on the first day of Hari Raya.

At times, Dr Mahathir's home looked like an enclave for the United Nations. People came from around the world, some visiting Malaysia for the first time and many were amazed to get such close access to the nation's highest leader.

"The idea is phenomenal; this would never happen back in the United Kingdom," said Damien Quigg, 28, who has been in Malaysia for the past week on business.

Quigg and his friend Jim Ganley, 26, are visitors from Scotland and were told by a taxi driver about the annual event at the Prime Minister's residence.

So the duo queued up at 9am and waited for 1 1/2 hour before getting to meet Dr Mahathir. When the moment finally came, Quigg was surprised to get more time with the Prime Minister than he expected.

"I was a bit cheeky and asked for a photograph with him and I got one," he said.

"In most countries, it is impossible to get such close access to leaders. In the United States, where I live, it might be possible to shake President Clinton's hand, but not before passing through a rigorous security check.

"And it would be impossible for most people to "drop by" the White House, casually walk up to the President, pose for a photograph and then grab a plate of food.

I decided to ask Dr Mahathir's son, Mirzan Mahathir, how his family can host an open house without a lot of concern for security. Strolling up to Mirzan and chatting away is in sharp contrast to the US. "I'd be hauled off quicker than you can say salam if I walked up so blithely to Chelsea Clinton."

"Security is a consideration but it is in a subdued way," he explained. "We feel today is a day of celebration."

Ganesh Mahalingam, who is from India and visiting Malaysia for the first time, was also impressed by the open house.

"It is not possible to meet the Prime Minister in India," he said. "I waited for 1 1/2 hour in line; in India I would have waited for eight hours.

"In many countries, the whole concept of an open house at the President or Prime Minister's residence is too alien to imagine. I conjure images of people trampling through the White House and wonder how more than 42,000 people can enter the Prime Minister's house almost without a hitch.

Pam Martinez, an American from Houston, Texas said this was her second year visiting the Prime Minister's residence for Hari Raya and she is still surprised he opens his home to others.

"The Malaysian way is to have people in and feed them," she said. "It's how they show love."

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