

26 SEP 1999

Mahathir-Sabah (Focus)

DR MAHATHIR'S LATEST VISIT HAS MADE SABAHANS MORE POSITIVE

By: Jackson Sawatan

LAHAD DATU, Sept 26 (Bernama) -- It was partly cloudy over the Lahad Datu skies on Sept 17, the day Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad was scheduled to launch a plantation scheme developed under the hardcore poor development programme in Bahagak, some 60km from this east coast town of Sabah.

At 9.30am, many in the 4,000-strong crowd who had come from as far as Semporna, some 170km away, looked up anxiously at the sky and noticed the formation of a few cluster of dark clouds over their heads.

"I hope it won't rain," an elderly man was overheard saying to his friend.

They had a reason to be anxious -- for the Prime Minister had just flown from Labuan to Tawau that morning and from there he would take another flight by helicopter to reach this remote plantation -- a journey that would depend very much on the weather conditions.

Moreover it would be Dr Mahathir's first visit to the plantation site and it was an occasion they would not want to miss.

Others became calm when one in the crowd spoke aloud his thoughts: "The Prime Minister can make it bah!. His helicopter is a special one and is capable of handling bad weather conditions."

There were sighs of relief, however, when the master of ceremony announced that the Prime Minister was already on his way here.

Exactly at 10am. the helicopter bringing Dr Mahathir and his entourage including Chief Minister Datuk Osu Sukam, touched down at a makeshift helipad, some 100 metres from the grandstand.

As the Prime Minister alighted, the enthusiastic crowd rushed forward to shake his hands.

At one point, the spirited crowd had to be controlled so that the Prime Minister could make his way into the grandstand.

Addressing them later, Dr Mahathir apologised for not being able to shake hands with all of them.

"I wish to thank one and all for welcoming me with all the warmth of your hearts. I apologise for not being able to shake hands with all of you," he said

Dr Mahathir spoke about the government's determination to make Malaysia a developed country by the year 2020, which he said, was achievable if the right government, with a proven track record, was re-elected by the people.

Stressing that the people should believe in themselves, he said Malaysians like mariner Datuk Azhar Mansor, who sailed solo around the world, had proved to the world that Malaysians too can do what others can.

"The Bajaus are known for their sailing skills and I hope that one day, there will be a Bajau from Sabah who would go sailing around the world," he said, to the delight of the crowd, who were mostly from the Bajau community, the majority of the people in Lahad Datu.

There was a slight drizzle for a few minutes when the Prime Minister delivered his speech but by the time Dr Mahathir left the function an hour later, the sky was clear again, in time for the VIP entourage to return to Tawau for lunch with community leaders there.

A few hours later, the Prime Minister was in Kota Kinabalu meeting the state Umno leaders and attended another function during the night.

What made the Prime Minister's visit to Sabah different this time around was that not only did he attend political functions or launch

development programmes as in his previous visits, but he had also flagged off two international sporting events at cool-weather Kundasang, Ranau, about 80km from here.

They were the 15th World Mountain Running Trophy and the Malaysia Invitational hang gliding championship "Kinabalu Challenge '99".

This was the second time the Prime Minister had visited the picturesque Ranau this year.

In May, he was in the district to meet the people at the community hall where he promised the people of this hill district that he would think of ways and means to help develop the area, known for its Mount Kinabalu and as the state's main producer of vegetables.

"I believe there is a way to better develop Ranau," he said then.

Full of ideas as he is, Dr Mahathir was the man behind the hosting of the hang gliding event, thus putting Ranau and Mount Kinabalu on the world list of hang gliding destinations -- and opened up a world of opportunities for the district and its people.

Dr Mahathir also expressed Malaysia's wish to host the world hang gliding championship in 2003 at the country's highest mountain, a move which will surely generate more interest in Ranau.

Having seen the spectacular hang gliding event and the huge interest it generated, the people of Ranau are confident that things can only improve for them from now on.

"This is good. This is the first time that this type of event is held here. We are looking forward for the year 2003...by then there will be even more tourists coming here," said a local from Kampung Bundutuhan, near Kundasang.

Mount Kinabalu is already a popular destination among world mountain running enthusiasts thanks to the annual Mount Kinabalu International Climathon and the recent World Mountain Running Trophy, which Malaysia hosted for the first time.

After Kundasang, Dr Mahathir left for Tuaran to deliver his keynote address to the 400 participants of the four-day Barisan Nasional (BN) youth convention at a sea resort.

It was a closed door function but the thunderous applause audible outside the convention hall indicated another morale-boosting gathering the BN youth had with the Prime Minister.

At a news conference later, Dr Mahathir said he had explained to the convention the concept of BN and how it came about, so that they would fight for BN with full knowledge on what the BN is.

Journalists covering the visit to this second largest state in the country had trouble keeping with the pace as the visit was rather tight.

But at the end of the visit, when a journalist asked whether he preferred a more relaxed trip, Dr Mahathir said that the schedule was not that tight and he only delivered three speeches that day.

"I would prefer to stay at home," he said in jest. Two days later, he was visiting Perlis and the programme there were no less hectic!

All in all, from Bagahak to Tuaran, from sports to politics, Dr Mahathir's recent visit to Sabah had kindled the local people's eagerness to win and to excel.

-- BERNAMA

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