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Department (A special report)
GOODBYE JALAN DATUK ONN

By: Ahmad Fuad Yahya

KUALA LUMPUR, June 15 (Bernama) -- Jalan Datuk Onn, a street named after one of Malaysia's illustrious sons, has been synonymous with the Prime Minister's Department, the country's administrative nerve-centre for the past 42 years since Independence.

Tomorrow's entry in the country's annals will put June 16, 1999 as the last day that government decisions will come out from Bukit Perdana in Jalan Datuk Onn.

Why?

The Cabinet is scheduled to hold its final meeting there tomorrow, said Press Secretary to the Prime Minister Zakaria Abdul Wahab.

As for the following Wednesday, the cabinet will henceforth meet at the ultra-modern new federal administrative capital in Putrajaya, 40km from here, he said.

Only twice during the 42 years that the Prime Minister's Office in Jalan Datuk Onn was temporarily shifted to Parliament House, several km away, as the country's administrative command and control centre.

Once was when second prime minister Tun Abdul Razak Hussein was redeveloping the Prime Minister's Department complex and the second instance, when Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's office was damaged by a fire in 1982.

"It's a priceless national heritage!" that is how those who have served the PM's Department in the early days after Independence described the Jalan Datuk Onn complex.

A former chief secretary to the government Tan Sri Abdullah Salleh said the first PM's Department building there was a wooden structure hastily erected to get the Prime Minister's Office ready in 1957 because of the imminent Independence on Aug 31.

It was built near the Residency, a former official residence of the British Adviser to Selangor, which was later renovated and made the official quarters of first prime minister Tunku Abdul Rahman.

The Tunku had had the convenience of only having to walk down to his office and of usually entering it through the back door!

The Tunku's official residence then is now part of the Tunku Abdul Rahman Memorial adjacent to the PM' Department complex in Jalan Datuk Onn which also housed the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, office of the Home Minister and the Economic Planning Unit.

"During the pre-Independence days, the Sultan Abdul Samad building served as the government secretariat... upon Independence, we have the Selangor government and the federal government, so the government built temporary federal offices in Bukit Perdana," Abdullah told Bernama in an interview.

Abdullah said he became familiar with the Jalan Datuk Onn complex upon being appointed private secretary to Tunku Abdul Rahman in 1959.

National Archives documents quoted the 1957 Public Works Department annual report as saying that the original PM's Department complex in Jalan Datuk Onn cost RM248,000 to build.

The PWD report said, because of the impending Independence, the complex and office of the Statistics Department, which was crucial for the 1957 Census, were completed within four months.

When he yearned for those nostalgic days at Jalan Datuk Onn, Abdullah said he would mark the Tunku Abdul Rahman Memorial as a "must-visit" on his

daily routine.

What incident would he describe as indelible from his memory of the wooden-structure days of the Jalan Datuk Onn PM Department's complex?

Abdullah said it was the tiff between Tunku and the home minister then Tun Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman which prompted Ismail to tender his resignation from the cabinet.

"The Tunku came to me that morning... See this note Dollah, it's a resignation letter.

"What am I to do with it Sir?...Tunku replied, keep it," Abdullah said.

Abdullah kept the letter in a safe and a few days later again asked Tunku what was he supposed to do about it.

Again Tunku told Abdullah to keep it.

Tunku gave him the same instruction when he raised the matter with the prime minister several days after that until Abdullah received a call from Ismail's private secretary about his boss wanting to see Tunku.

Abdullah said he alerted Tunku of Ismail's imminent call on the prime minister and soon the loud sounds of a man marching on the timber flooring made no mistake about the mood of the incoming visitor.

Then, taking turns with two other fellow workers to peep through a key hole of the closed doors of the prime minister's office, Abdullah said he spied on the antics of the home minister and Tunku although he could not make out their conversation.

"Tun Ismail looked animatedly angry and raised his fist when confronting Tunku who was instead grinning ear to ear at Tun Ismail.

"Personality-wise they are poles apart. We didn't hear what they were saying. Gradually Tun Ismail's stern expression gave away to a smile and soon after that he and Tunku both were laughing, " he said.

The three peeping toms were so engrossed with the key-hole view that they had no time to act natural when Ismail ended his call on the prime minister and walked towards the door.

Abdullah said they had time only to stand erect as Ismail opened the door and to this day he was unsure whether the home minister had suspected the trio of eavesdropping.

The timber structures of the Jalan Datuk Onn complex remained in use until the early 1970s, even after Abdullah was seconded from the PM's Department to Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia in 1969 as the university's registrar.

Abdullah was subsequently made chairman of the UKM council from 1975 to 1987.

While serving with the university, he often met Tunku's successor Tun Abdul Razak at the prime minister's interim office at Parliament House while waiting for the completion of the new complex of the PM's Department.

Abdullah later returned to the PM's Department upon being appointed Chief Secretary to the Government in 1976 and served with third prime minister Tun Hussein Onn until Abdullah's retirement in 1978.

Tun Hussein indeed also had a rare distinction of having a street named after his father as his office address.

On the brand new PM's Department in Putrajaya, Abdullah said: " We are going one step further better and better, from a wooden building to concrete building, and now to a very impressive building.

Malaysia now has a building like the British Cabinet room in Downing Street in London to serve the next 100 years and beyond.

Describing Putrajaya as most suitable, he commended the planning to locate the new federal administrative capital there.

"Halfway between the airport (the KLIA at Sepang) and halfway from the commercial centre Kuala Lumpur... the planning is very good. I look at the whole thing, I think it's superb," he said.

He expressed hope that the Jalan Datuk Onn complex would be preserved, perhaps as a Malaysian Civil Service museum because the civil service of independent Malaysia was born there.

"I think this (building) is historical, as much as I have written to Dr Mahathir that we should keep the Merdeka Stadium for posterity... and again I feel the PM's Department should be preserved," he said.

According to Abdullah, Dr Mahathir had said to him that he (Abdullah) was being overly sentimental about the Merdeka Stadium.

"Perhaps I am sentimental because those days people of my generation, we sat there and shouted Merdeka! Merdeka! on that wet morning of 31st August 1957.

"Whoever was there on that day, wouldn't like to see Merdeka Stadium which was specially built to commemorate our own independence to be demolished," he said.

As for Abdullah, the PM's Department complex in Jalan Datuk Onn must be preserved for posterity.

He expressed hope that the current President of Badan Warisan Malaysia (the national heritage organisation) Tan Sri Ahmad Sarji Abdul Hamid, also a former chief secretary to the government, would ensure that the buildings at Jalan Datuk Onn are preserved.

-- BERNAMA

AFY RYN