

19 JAN 1999

Mahathir-Support

MAHATHIR OVERWHELMED BY SHOW OF SUPPORT

KUALA LUMPUR, Jan 19 (Bernama) -- A record crowd of about 40,000 people thronged Sri Perdana, the official residence of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, for his annual Hari Raya open house today not only to wish him Selamat Hari Raya but also to express their support for him.

Malaysians from all walks of life made a beeline for the annual open house from 10am till about 5.30pm with a lunch break in-between.

Dr Mahathir said that unlike his previous Hari Raya open house, many came today to express their support for him and the Barisan Nasional (BN) government.

Speaking to reporters later, Dr Mahathir said some of them thanked him for saving the country.

"One even said 'Thank you for saving the country from the devils.' I don't know who the devils are but that is what they said," he said.

Dr Mahathir said there was overwhelming support from the people from all walks of life.

"I expected a little (support) but not this overwhelming support and this year they don't just shake hands (with me) but express their feelings," he said, when asked if the support was unexpected.

Dr Mahathir said they appeared to be happy with the government's measures (to revive the national economy).

He said he had expected a smaller crowd this year as some people might have had the impression that there would be riots.

"But it appears that they are not bothered...this year (the number of visitors) is extraordinary and they expressed their support in their greetings," he said.

Asked whether the support was an encouraging sign, Dr Mahathir said: "Well, I must say it is encouraging. It is an expression of support for the government."

Asked if the support augurs well for the BN, especially with the general election not far away, he said: "Well, it is good for election, it being an election year, but it doesn't mean that it (we) should have an election."

Asked by a Japanese reporter for his New Year wish, Dr Mahathir said he hoped Malaysia would remain peaceful as always and that the country's economy would improve.

Among the first to wish Dr Mahathir and his wife, Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohamed Ali, "Selamat Hari Raya" were Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and his wife, Datin Seri Endon Mahmood.

Leaders of political parties, including MCA president and Transport Minister Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik, MIC president and Works Minister Datuk Seri S. Samy Vellu and opposition leader and DAP secretary-general Lim Kit Siang were also there to greet the prime minister.

Amid the usual tight security at the prime minister's residence, the crowd at the open house was so huge that several of the visitors apparently fainted or had to be helped by their friends or family members.

The open house, from 10am to 12.30pm is an annual affair by the prime minister and his wife where the public can visit them and enjoy the Hari Raya goodies.

Many who attended the open house said they wanted to see Dr Mahathir personally to express their support for him.

A teacher, Sabidah Madon, 37, who came with her husband and five

children, said she came to show support to Dr Mahathir.

"I am very happy to have the opportunity to 'bersalam' with the PM. And this is my first encounter with the PM," she said.

Meanwhile, two Scots said they had an unusual experience when they decided to heed a taxi driver's advice to pay the prime minister a visit for the first time.

Damien Quigg, 28, who is in Malaysia for business and pleasure, said it was good to have met Dr Mahathir.

"I have a lot of respect for your prime minister," he said.

Quigg said he was astonished to see so many people of all races queueing to meet the prime minister.

"There is no such thing such as 'open house' by a premier in Britain where citizens are given the opportunity to meet and greet the country's leader and be given refreshments.

"In Britain, the prime minister will never see the people, it is the people who meet the PM ... it is a very unusual experience," he said.

Jim Ganley, 26, who is on holiday, said he made it a point to visit Dr Mahathir today as part of his visit here.

Housewife Sitadevi Ram Khaelawan, on her first visit to Sri Perdana, said she felt very honoured to meet the premier and his wife, and said they were her idols.

"He's the best leader," she said.

Insurance agent Amy Foong, and her friend, Yimy Leong, 24, said they were very happy to have the opportunity to greet Dr Mahathir.

Accounts clerk Koh York Hwan, 29, said she wanted to visit Sri Perdana "to know what is it like being there."

"I am happy and felt honoured to meet the PM and his wife," she added.

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