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Malaysians pack stadium to celebrate

Rashid Yusof; Aion Mohd; Azrani Rustam; Annie Freeda Cruetz
KUALA LUMPUR, Mon. - Cheering Malaysians linked by video from venues nationwide to a packed National Stadium in Bukit Jalil tonight celebrated the last National Day before the new millennium.

Exactly 42 years after centuries of colonial rule left our shores and with the new era around the corner, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Mahathir Mohamad launched the "Centennial Towards the New Millennium" celebrations at the stadium.

Dr Mahathir said the turnout of about 120,000 in Bukit Jalil was "fantastic", and that it eclipsed crowds at previous National Day celebrations and even during the Commonwealth Games..

"The stadium looks small (as a result)," he told a Press conference.

The main ceremony at the stadium showcased the sea change in the lives of Malaysians for the past 42 years. The national flag fluttered on the big screen and was hoisted electronically, replacing the traditional flag-raising ceremony at Dataran Merdeka.

Dr Mahathir also inserted a time chip with a message to be unveiled 100 years from now.

The Prime Minister, who was greeted with a loud applause, spoke to each State leader via video-conferencing.

He told the leaders that he was touched by the display of patriotism by the young, saying it was wrong to say that they did not appreciate independence.

On the participation of many Malaysians not born when the country gained independence, Dr Mahathir said many of these young Malaysians were happily celebrating National Day.

The crowd cheered when Dr Mahathir spoke to Kelantan Menteri Besar Datuk Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat through the video-conferencing. Nik Aziz hoped Kelantan would continue to develop.

"Kelantan has been backward under various colonial masters. However, now it is turning to be better and we are more developed."

In jest, Dr Mahathir answered that he hoped Malaysians could continue to enjoy dikir barat, which was banned by Nik Aziz.

Penang Chief Minister Tan Sri Koh Tsu Koon said the thousands of Malaysians, especially the younger generation in Penang, who had crowded the Esplanade to celebrate National Day showed that they supported the leadership.

On video-conferencing, Dr Mahathir said this new technology could also link people abroad.

"As we talk, we can see the people and hear them," he said.

The night started early for the big crowd who were entertained by singer Siti Nurhaliza and shows relayed from the other States.

Excitement soared as they saw Dr Mahathir behind the wheel of the Proton cabriolet. He was given a rousing welcome.

In a lighter vein, Dr Mahathir said later the crowd must have been applauding the car.

At midnight, fireworks lit up followed by the entry of 14 Proton cars.

In Klang, for the first time in many years, thousands came to celebrate National Day at Dataran Shah Alam.

The festival began at 8pm with several artistes belting out several old and new songs much to the delight of the crowd who had gathered despite the slight drizzle.

To mark the National Day celebrations, 42 contingents took part in the parade. Leading the march past was the 20-member Platoon Serunai Six Regiment Ranger followed by 20 bearers of the Jalur Gemilang.

The crowd cheered when the 54-member Selangor Government contingent marched past followed by those from Klang, Petaling, Kuala Selangor, Hulu Langat, Sabak Bernam, Kuala Langat, Sepang, Petaling Jaya and Gombak district offices.

The Hulu Selangor contingent was led by Orang Asli.

All the municipal and district councils had sent contingents besides those from the Selangor Islamic Religious Department, Selangor Economic Development Corporation, Tenaga Nasional Berhad, Ex-Army Association, Fire and Rescue Department, Customs and Excise Department and the Immigration Department.

The Road Transport Department, Prisons Department, Rela, police and Universiti Teknologi Mara also sent their contingents.

There were also school bands and contingents from various school clubs and societies.

Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Abu Hassan Omar took to the stage and saluted the contingents as they passed by. Also on the stage were State Executive Council members, State Assemblymen and senior government officials.

Abu Hassan then left for the video-conferencing session at the 19th floor of the State Government building with Dr Mahathir at 10pm.

While Abu Hassan was away, a cultural show was held at Dataran Shah Alam. At 11.30pm all the artistes gathered to sing Keroncong Selangor 2000.

As the clock struck 12, all that could be heard was Merdeka! Merdeka! Merdeka!. The crowd was entertained by the artistes till 1am.

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