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Over 40,000 well-wishers at Dr M's Hari Raya open house

A RECORD CROWD ... More than 40,000 people thronged the Prime Minister's Hari Raya open house at his Seri Perdana official residence yesterday.

The crowd gathered at the residence from as early as 8.30am, although the gates only opened at 10.30am.

Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and his wife Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohamed Ali stood at the hallway and greeted the visitors from 10.30am to 1.30pm.

Dr Mahathir and Dr Siti Hasmah took a short break to perform their zohor prayers before continuing to welcome visitors until 6pm.

Speaking to reporters, Dr Mahathir said he was touched by the overwhelming support expressed by well-wishers.

"Some of them expressed their gratitude, telling me that I managed to save the country. One visitor said I managed to save the country from the devils. I don't know who are the devils he is talking about," he said.

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

"I expected a little (support) but not such overwhelming support. This year they did not just shake hands (with me) but expressed their feelings," he said, when asked if the support was unexpected.

Dr Mahathir said the people 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 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 "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 present.

The crowd was so huge that several visitors fainted and had to be helped by friends or family.

There was also a tremendous turnout of more than 20,000 people, dignitaries and the public at Abdullah's open house at the Putra World Trade Centre.

The people began arriving two hours ahead of schedule, surging up several escalators to reach Dewan Merdeka located on the fourth floor. The PWTC lobby was constantly swarming with people queueing for the escalators.

The crowds were so overwhelming that Abdullah could not shake hands with every visitor, and instead gave a welcome address inside the hall. The people swamped him and his wife, jostling to take photographs of them.

"I am grateful and happy that so many people came," Abdullah said.

He said Malaysians were clearly not reluctant to come to the open house held by government leaders and other community leaders.

The Deputy Prime Minister also said he was happy to see people of different races and religions, including many religious leaders, visiting him as this showed a spirit of mutual respect and tolerance.

Asked to comment if his appointment had calmed the political situation, he said if it had, he was grateful.

Abdullah said he realised that behind the show of support for him, there was hope that he would carry out his duties well and fairly, and taking into consideration the people's views.

* MORE PICTURES: P4 & 5

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