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PM opens world's tallest building in glittering ceremony

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KUALA LUMPUR, Tues. - The nation's celebratory mood soared tonight with the opening of the tallest building in the world, which the Prime Minister said, expressed the towering ambition of Malaysia to become a developed nation.

"When one is short, one should stand on a box to get a better view," Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said of the country of 22 million people which celebrated its 42nd National Day today.

He then provided the link: "The (Petronas) Twin Towers is to our ego what the box is to the shortie."

The crowd enjoyed this logic. Expanding, Dr Mahathir said some might disagree. "We need something to express our towering ambition - an ambition to become a developed country.

"Some Malaysians too will disagree. But perceptions differ as between different people. We do as we think fit," he said.

Dr Mahathir added that a majority of Malaysians favoured these projects as "they do not prevent us from bringing down poverty from 50 per cent to seven per cent".

What was to unfold next was the full spectacle of a glittering ceremony which has significance beyond Malaysian shores. It culminated in a brilliant display of fireworks screeching into the night sky.

Taking a cue from the Petronas Twin Towers' record as the tallest building on the planet, and from its hold on the national psyche as a symbol of pride, officials made sure the night was a memorable one.

Tonight, an enormous screen hanging from the skybridge connecting both towers at the 42nd level, quickly became the focal point.

Millions of Malaysians caught the spectacle live on TV1. Petronas' newly-revamped website at <http://www.petronas.com.my> also carried the proceedings.

Thousands of people, meanwhile, crowded the streets at the base of the towers and at the nearby KLCC park, where giant screens were erected for people to view the proceedings.

Dr Mahathir led the one-hour festivities with a speech, which was preceded by welcoming remarks by Petronas chairman Tan Sri Azizan Zainul Abidin, who traced its humble origins as a manager of production sharing contracts.

Azizan said: "Our greatest achievement has been the contribution made by the corporation to the development of the people and the nation."

The ceremony kicked off with a reading of a poem entitled Di Sisi Menara (By The Towers), composed just for the occasion by national laureate Datuk A. Samad Said.

The Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra then launched into a stirring rendition of Les Toreadors from Carmen, before segueing effortlessly into a series of nationalistic songs - Sejahtera Malaysia, Lembayung Jingga and Malaysia Berjaya - with the vocal accompaniment of the Gala Choir.

Traditionally-clad dancers from the Petronas Performing Arts Group then emerged on the elevated stage to perform a candle dance, before being joined by a group of young children bearing torches.

Three of the young performers invited Dr Mahathir down from the VIP dais, where, accompanied by Azizan and Petronas president and chief executive officer Tan Sri Mohd Hassan Marican, he was led to the stage.

Dr Mahathir signed a commemorative plaque, and then officially opened

the Petronas Twin Towers by placing a torch in a designated spot on a light sculpture.

An image of the signed plaque was immediately projected on the giant screen, and to the awed delight of the thousands of onlookers, was simultaneously marked by a burst of fireworks from the skybridge.

For the next few minutes, a spectacular light and sound show ensued as images representing Malaysia, its history and its people were projected on both the screen and the 452-metre towers.

Tonight marked the culmination of years of planning and work to create a world famous landmark in Malaysia as a symbol of the nation's aspirations to be a developed country.

Every step of the construction process involved an engineering and architectural feat. After excavation work began in March 1994, the towers grew under the nation's gaze, marking each milestone in construction.

The distinctive skybridge was pulled into place in August 1995, while the pinnacles on both buildings were in place by March 1996.

In April 1996, the United States-based Council of Tall Buildings and Urban Habitats declared the Petronas Twin Towers the tallest building in the world.

But the towers are more than just a national record. With several other similar construction projects in progress around the world, it is only a matter of time before their height will be eclipsed.

What is more significant is how the towers have changed the city's skyline forever. They are also home to a number of multi-national corporations, Malaysia's first Philharmonic Hall, the Petronas Art Gallery and the classy Suria KLCC mall.

While their silhouettes will forever be their most immediate feature, the towers will also be remembered for bringing art and music to the heart of the capital city, and for bearing the nation's hopes for its future.

At the ceremony tonight, Dr Mahathir who typically followed the progress of the construction closely, congratulated Petronas and others for building the towers, saying the nation appreciates their contributions.

He said the ceremony marked the beginning of a futuristic endeavour for Malaysia as symbolised by the Petronas Twin Towers. And, only history, he said, shall bear witness to the endeavour.

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