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Ahmad Arshad spent his life helping rubber smallholders

DATUK Ahmad Arshad was a man who devoted much of his life helping the smallholders community.

Even on the day before he died, he was still giving his views on the need to give incentives to smallholders and landowners who could maximise land usage to increase food production.

"He was delighted that he could present his views to Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad," said his widow Datin Habibah Zainal Abidin. Ahmad had met the Prime Minister at the Agricultural Sector Co-ordinating Council for the Private and Public Sector meeting in Bangi last Thursday.

The National Association of Smallholders (NASH) president died at his house in Jalan Temenggong in Segamat the following day. He was 79.

Habibah said Ahmad had also expressed happiness that Dr Mahathir had accepted his invitation to officiate at NASH's 25th anniversary celebrations to be held soon.

"That was the happiest moment in his years of struggle to upgrade the standard of living and income of smallholders," she added.

The man had carried the burden of trust accorded to him by more than 500,000 smallholders for the last two decades.

But he was one who never lamented about the task. Known to be a responsible and selfless leader, Ahmad often said he was willing to serve the smallholders until the end.

He was vocal about the low and unstable natural rubber prices, and critical about the inability of the now disbanded International Natural Rubber Organisation to obtain fair and equitable prices for producers, in particular smallholders.

One of the factors that made Ahmad a people's man was the condition he grew up in, and his political background.

Born in Kampung Gudang Garam in Segamat, he grew up in a poor family and his bitter experiences during the Japanese Occupation moulded him to be tough.

His love for the country saw him joining the Peninsula Malay Movement in the 1940s and taking part in fighting against Malayan Union and, subsequently, for the independence of the country.

In September 1979, Ahmad made headlines when he made a speech in Bahasa Malaysia at the United Nations, on Malaysia's stand towards the Palestinian struggle.

Ahmad served as Member of Parliament for Tangkak, before being appointed a Senator in the 1970s. He was one of the founders of Ledang Umno, which was previously known as Tangkak Umno.

A teacher by profession, Ahmad once said that seeing the hard life led by the smallholders reminded him against spending lavishly.

For example, he would take the express bus although he was entitled to fly, when invited by association members to their functions.

"I don't want to be accused of being a spendthrift," he once told a reporter.

With his demise, the smallholders community has indeed lost a fatherly figure.

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