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An emotional encounter for PM

Ahmad A. Talib in Sarajevo

IT was an emotional encounter for Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, his wife Datuk Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali and the Malaysian entourage at the Prime Minister's last stop during his brief visit here.

On the way to the airport for his departure home, Dr Mahathir visited the Camil Sijaric school, financed significantly by Malaysian teachers and students following a fund-raising campaign in Malaysia a few years ago.

To everyone's surprise, except the school administrators, 700 pupils and their teachers put up a stirring display of gratitude to Dr Mahathir in particular, and to the rest of the Malaysians in general.

Children dressed in colourful costumes and carrying mini Malaysian flags lined the path to the school hall entrance.

Once inside, the entourage was greeted by more children and paintings on the wall.

The school choir, joined by the rest of the pupils aged between six and 13, then rendered a song with words decrying war, done with such spirit that the hall reverberated with their voice.

Tears were the appropriate response to such an open display by the school children, many of whom had gone through their infant years during the peak of the war in the early 90s.

A member of the teaching staff, in her words of welcome, said: "We can't forget what you have done for us, for our school, for our children.

"Please tell all the teachers and the school children in your country who had contributed to the building of this school what you have seen here.

"In our darkest hour, you have given us light," she said.

Politely, she asked if the Prime Minister could oblige the school with a speech.

It was not in the programme, but Dr Mahathir took to the microphone nonetheless.

"I'm touched by your display tonight," he said.

"As the lyrics to your song said, I agree that war is stupid, that it should never be repeated.

"There are other ways to settle our differences.

"You have a beautiful country.

"It's worth sacrificing to save it.

"Malaysia is your friend, in the war and in the rebuilding process.

"We'll carry the words of your song with us, we'll carry your message of peace to everyone back home.

"I wish our own children back home will appreciate the peace we have, a peace that has allowed us to grow, to get a proper education and to contribute to our society.

"I pray that you too can have a lasting peace so that you can also enjoy a good life.

"Perhaps, some day, you can come to Malaysia and get a chance to meet children of your own age."

Soon after the interpreter finished translating the speech, the school once again erupted into loud applause. The Prime Minister finished the visit shaking hands with the pupils.

Work to rebuild the school began in November 1996 with US\$1.12 million (RM4.25 million) taken from the Bosnian Education Aid Fund collection, and was completed in April 1997.

Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak, who was then Education Minister, was present at the re-opening of the school in October 1997.

Earlier, Dr Mahathir delivered a lecture at the University of Sarajevo where he said that an enduring peace based on racial and religious tolerance can ensure continued growth in most situations.

Speaking before lecturers and guests of the university, the Prime Minister spoke of power sharing among the political parties which has helped Malaysia prosper over the years.

(An almost similar situation exists in Bosnia Herzegovina, where Bosnians, Serbs and Croats are citizens of the federation and whose peaceful co-existence could make a difference between war and peace.)

Just before the lecture, Dr Mahathir toured the old section of the city and stopped at the Bey Mosque, built in 1521.

The mosque is undergoing extensive repairs, said its imam, Ismet Spahic.

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