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Year of numerous achievements

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AT THE stroke of midnight yesterday the world said goodbye to 1999, a year characterised by numerous achievements for Malaysia as a nation, and by the incredible feats accomplished by its people.

Taken together, these achievements have clearly strengthened the nation as a whole. Hopefully it will also make us better prepared to face the challenges to come in the new millennium.

As a nation, 1999 began with Malaysia already four months into tackling the economic crisis head-on, in its own unique way, after following the International Monetary Fund's example had brought about disastrous results.

In January, companies were breathing easier, there was more money in the system to finance recovery, factories were operating back slowly to the pre-crisis level, exports were increasing, and the Kuala Lumpur Stock Exchange Composite Index breached the 600-level from a low of 262 during the crisis.

In February, Commerce Asset Holding Bhd and Bank Bumiputra Malaysia Bhd formalised their agreement for the largest merger in Malaysia's banking history. Later known as Bumiputra Commerce Bank Bhd, the new entity is Malaysia's second largest banking group after Maybank.

Things were looking up, and this was even acknowledged by those outside Malaysia. International institutions, foreign analysts, and rating agencies who had previously criticised the measures taken by Malaysia were singing a different tune as it became clear that the measures were working.

Some of the nation's leading corporations posted impressive financial results in 1999. Maybank and Sime Darby both recorded pre-tax profit of RM1 billion each, Tenaga Nasional was back in the black, while Petronas saw record turnover of RM42 billion.

Praise for Malaysia's management of the economy and its rapid recovery came from visiting leaders attending high-profile meetings and conferences throughout the country.

There was the Langkawi International Dialogue in July, where developing countries from the Africa in particular eagerly sought to learn how Malaysia steered itself out of troubled waters.

There was also the International Advisory Panel meeting at Cyberjaya, a who's who of the world's information technology and multimedia industry. They all gave the thumbs up to the Cyberjaya and Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) project, which was incredibly ahead of schedule despite the crisis.

On August 31, to coincide with the Merdeka anniversary, Malaysia officially launched the world's tallest building, the Petronas Twin Towers. Together with the Kuala Lumpur City Centre (of which the Twin Towers are the main feature), Cyberjaya, and new administrative centre in Putrajaya, the MSC was starting to take shape in 1999.

On June 23, the Cabinet holds its first weekly meeting at Putrajaya, at the sprawling new Prime Minister's Department. The building quickly became a major attraction for visiting dignitaries, and was also open to visits by the Malaysian public.

As further proof that the Malaysian economy was regaining its strength, the country successfully hosted international events which continued to draw in active participation and crowds from around the world.

The Langkawi International Maritime and Aerospace Exhibition (Lima) saw

more than 700 exhibitors participating. Malaysia's largest book fair was held at the Mines exhibition centre. The annual IT, furniture, and audio-video fairs at the Putra World Trade Centre were still packed.

In sports, Malaysia hosted the World Cup Golf 1999, won by the US which included world number one Tiger Woods. Before that in October, millions of viewers from around the world were on the edge of their seats watching the Petronas Malaysian Grand Prix in Sepang.

The Formula One race got more publicity than it bargained for when Team Ferrari's Eddie Irvine and Michael Schumacher won first and second place but were later disqualified, giving the win to third-placed Mika Hakkinen, then chasing his third consecutive world championship. This decision was later overturned following an appeal by Ferrari.

The accomplishment of Malaysians in sports reached an ultimate high in 1999 at the South-East Asia Games. It was Malaysia's best performance ever, winning 57 gold, 45 silver and 42 bronze to come in second.

Even more memorable, of course, were the extraordinary achievements of ordinary Malaysians during the year. Like Datuk Azhar Mansor, who set sail from Langkawi on February 2 to circumnavigate the globe on his own. He would return victorious 190 days later on August 11.

On hand to greet him were hundreds of Malaysians, including Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who summed up what everyone must have felt that night: "I'm proud to be a Malaysian."

On April 19, Gerald and Justin Read become the first Malaysians to walk the final degree to the North Pole. For eight days, the brothers walked 111 km in temperatures as low as minus 30 degrees, over ice of up to six metres thick.

This enterprising and adventurous spirit among Malaysians continued even to the very last day of 1999, with a Malaysian team of parachutists taking part for the first time in the Millennium Jump 2000 over the South Pole.

In September, National Space Science Division director-general Datuk Dr Mazlan Othman is appointed director of the United Nations Office for Outer Space Affairs, the first woman from a developing nation to be appointed to the post.

Malaysia was also in the public eye and among the top headlines in the foreign media in 1999 for developments in the political arena, in particular the continuing case of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim.

Early January, Inspector-General of Police Tan Sri Rahim Noor announced his resignation, assuming responsibility for the injuries suffered in police custody by Anwar. He would later admit that he was personally responsible for the injuries.

On April 4, Anwar's wife Datin Seri Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail launched the Angkatan Keadilan Nasional, which would later lead to the formation of the Parti Keadilan Nasional (Keadilan).

Keadilan, together with Pas, PRM and the DAP, would later form a rare coalition of opposition parties to ensure a one-to-one fight in the general elections.

On April 14, the Kuala Lumpur High Court sentenced Anwar to a six-year jail term on each of four counts of corrupt practice. The terms are to run concurrently. Anwar's trial on sodomy charges have also begun.

After more than a year of intense speculation, Dr Mahathir announces the dissolution of Parliament on November 10, surprising everyone with a last minute cancellation of his proposed trip to Johannesburg and Durban for the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting.

The Parliament is dissolved in mid-session. As a result, the 2000 Budget tabled by Finance Minister Tun Daim Zainuddin on October 29 has to be retabled when the next Parliament sits.

November 29 is polling day, the first time polling nationwide is done in

only one day. By 2.05am on the November 30, Barisan Nasional secured its two-thirds majority in the 193-seat Dewan Rakyat.

The BN also wins control in all state legislative assemblies except Kelantan and Terengganu. Pas maintains its hold on Kelantan, wrestled Terengganu from BN and Umno, and made inroads in Kedah and Pahang. The opposition's number in Parliament grows.

Dr Mahathir's Cabinet for the new millennium sees some new faces and promotions, partly due to the defeat of several ministers and deputy ministers in the elections. The opposition announces its own "shadow" cabinet.

At a special four-day sitting of Dewan Rakyat beginning December 20, the opposition MPs stage a walk-out even before they are sworn in as MPs, to protest what they said was the unconstitutionality of the proceedings.

They would later re-enter Parliament again to be sworn in. The four day session passes Expenditure in Accounts to finance the Government for the first six months of 2000, until the 2000 Budget is retabled and passed by the legislature.

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