

'Uphold spirit of unity for continued peace, prosperity'

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Dr Mahathir: Malaysian tradition to celebrate each other's festival

By Noor Adzman Baharuddin

PENANG, Sun. — Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad tonight called on Malaysians to uphold the spirit of unity as it has proven to be the best element for continued peace and prosperity for the nation.

"We are a peace-loving and tolerant lot," the Prime Minister said. "Despite our multi-racial background, we have managed to remain united and also develop our country together."

Taking a leaf from the nation's history, Dr Mahathir said many quarters had doubts that Malaysia could remain united, let alone become a developing nation after achieving Independence 43 years ago.

"But you can see for yourselves tonight that we are as united as ever and as caring and loving to one another."

"We are here, with about 40,000 Malaysians and foreign tourists, celebrating the Chinese New Year open house in peace and with great pomp," he said when launching the national-level Chinese New Year open house at the Georgetown's historical enclaves of Lebuhr Armenian and Cannon Square.

Accompanying Dr Mahathir was Datuk Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali. Among the VIPs present were Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, Chief Minister Tan Sri Dr Koh Tsu Koon and the Perak and Perlis Menteris

Besar Datuk Seri Tajol Rosli Ghazali and Datuk Seri Shahidan Kassim respectively.

Also present were Kedah Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Syed Razak Syed Zain and Malacca Chief Minister Datuk Wira Mohd Ali Rustam and their wives.

Dr Mahathir said the fact that Malaysians could celebrate all the major religious and cultural festivals together was proof of the unceasing spirit of unity among all Malaysians.

"We are now celebrating each other's festival and this is the Malaysian tradition," he said, "and we all agree on this."

Meanwhile, in jest, Dr Mahathir said: "I am sure many of you have read about me in the Internet and elsewhere which claimed that I am the chief devil in Malaysia."

"As you can see, I have no horns ... I am a very normal person like everyone else."

"The only difference is that I have been given this responsibility to lead the country through the process of election, and not impose upon you by me."

Malaysia, he said, is made up of about 36 ethnic groups, including the major ones like the Malays, Chinese and Indians as well as the various races in Sabah and Sarawak like the Ibans and Kadazans.

And due to the success of the national-level Raya Puasa celebrations, held last December and tonight's event, Dr Mahathir reiterated that all six major religious and cultural festivals in the

country would be held as national open house celebrations.

The remaining four festivals are Christmas, Deepavali, Pesta Keamatan and Hari Gawai.

Poking fun at the sporting Koh, Dr Mahathir said he was "afraid" of coming to Penang.

"He (Koh) gives me a lot of food to eat ... There are *char koay teow*, *Laksa Penang*, *nasi kandar* and other food.

"So, if I come to Penang, I will have to rest for four or five days to shed off the excess weight," he said much to the amusement of the

crowd, from all walks of life, who had gathered at the historical enclaves as early as 3pm today.

Our country, Dr Mahathir said, is prosperous. "Let's all work together," he said. "We believe our country can achieve greatness by the year 2020."