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Mahathir-Tenom (Special Report)

MAHATHIR WITNESSES "MALAYSIA BOLEH" SPIRIT, TENOM-STYLE

By: Jackson Sawatan

TENOM, March 30 (Bernama) -- A young Murut boy, sweat streaming down from the forehead to his collar, shadowed his eyes from the gleaming afternoon sun to have a better view of what beholds up in the sky.

Like most people thronging the town square and walkways, his attention was focussed at nine parajumpers leaping out of a Nomad aircraft from 1,700m up reminiscent of stunts he had only seen on television before.

In striking colours nine parachutes and the human lives clinging on to them opened into canopies like giant mushrooms and the boy, smiling broadly, joined the rest in a thunderous applause when the master of ceremony announced that one of the nine parajumpers was a Tenom-born brave.

More significantly, that Saturday afternoon the people of Tenom welcomed their most important guests -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and wife Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohamed Ali -- who spent the most part of their their two-day visit to Sabah last weekend here.

On a grandstand 30m across the field from where the boy stood, the prime minister himself was seen applauding the 26-year-old Murut hero Michael Keon for the neat landing which held thousands of watchers in awe.

The parajump was specially arranged as part of the welcome for Dr Mahathir. Speaking to the crowd later, Dr Mahathir said: "I am fascinated that a Tenom-born was among the jumpers...I am convinced that one day an all-Tenom-born team will perform the feat."

A rousing applause followed and Dr Mahathir went on commending the people of Tenom for their rich cultural tradition and other accomplishments despite the remoteness of the district.

Dr Mahathir singled out the renditions by the Tenom children's choir which has been a regular attraction in functions state-wide and a show-stealer at last year's cultural performance at the Bandung Institute of Technology in Indonesia.

According to organising chairman for the welcoming ceremony Datuk Rubin Balang, who is the assemblyman for Kemabong, some of the people present had walked for days through hills and slopes to reach the town in time for the prime minister's visit.

For Tenom to accommodate a massive turnout of 20,000 people that weekend, public transportation had to be barred from entering the town as even of 10am that Saturday it was already congested.

"In my life I have never seen so many people come to Tenom like today. In a way this is history for us," an elderly coffee-shop operator said while attending to clients in the packed eatery.

When addressing the crowd, Dr Mahathir said the government would do its utmost to bring development to people in remote areas like Tenom so that they too can enjoy the fruits of the country's progress.

Tenom, about 190 km from Kota Kinabalu is the homeland of the Murut community and is best known for Kopi Tenom -- a locally grown and ground coffee hailed as one of the best by connoisseurs.

Dr Mahathir thanked the people of Tenom for their show of solidarity and racial harmony despite the district's multi-ethnic population.

"The people of Tenom have inspired and given me and my colleagues the spirit to work harder to bring prospertiy to the people and country," said Dr Mahathir.

If what he saw on his first day in Tenom was already impressive, Dr

Mahathir was pleasantly surprised further in Lagud Seberang the next morning to open the Sabah Agriculture Park, 15km from here.

The 200-ha park has two sectors, one that is 56-ha in size with a recreational lake, a plant museum, an animal farm and a bee-rearing centre, among others, and the other, a 144-ha of exhibition plots, experimental agriculture lots and other facilities designed to make it a centre for agricultural research and development and the state's premier eco-tourism centre.

When back in Kota Kinabalu later for the ground-breaking of the new Federal Complex he related his amazing experience visiting Tenom and at a news conference late Sunday Dr Mahathir made known his fondness for the park, the first such facility in Sabah.

He said places as good as the Sabah Agriculture Park should be given enough publicity to enlighten more people, especially tourists, of its existence.

"It is one of the most fantastic gardens I have seen...", said Dr Mahathir.

Tenom exemplified Murut hospitality at its best and a place where age-old cultural traditions blend nicely with new values brought by modernisation.

-- BERNAMA

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