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Outreach project paying dividends

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SIK: It was Friday night (May 18), the end of the three-day Pemuda Masuk Kampung programme organised by Umno Youth in Kampung Selamat near here.

The villagers surprised their "adopted children" - including 30 Umno Youth Exco members - with a bunga api show. It was not the huge fireworks display urban folk are probably familiar with but it was nonetheless a memorable one.

It was actually a ritual to release a home-made flying lantern.

Like the lantern which flew high in the sky, the exco members, particularly its chief Datuk Hishammuddin Hussein, had high expectations about the success of their second project after the first in Kampung Baru Kuala Abang, Dungun, Terengganu, was criticised for the lack of commitment by the youth leaders.

This time around, Umno Youth went all out to prove that the project, which is primarily to enable the young leaders to understand the problems faced by rural folk, could be a success with proper planning and commitment.

"I never expected 100 per cent attendance of my exco members but this time almost all of them were there," said a delighted Hishammuddin who had to rush to Kampung Selamat, about 12km from Sik, after the party's disciplinary and management committee meeting in Kuala Lumpur ended on Wednesday night.

Only four exco members did not turn up for the three-day programme.

They were the movement's deputy head Datuk Abdul Aziz Sheikh Fadzir whose wife was hospitalised, Datuk Nur Jazlan Mohamed who was busy with preparations for the Prime Minister's visit to Johor on Saturday, Datuk Seri Dr Mohamad Khir Toyo who had a tight schedule as Selangor Menteri Besar and Datuk Mokhzani Mahathir who was still on leave.

During the welcoming ceremony on Wednesday, the villagers treated the participants to traditional music and a silat show before they were "handed over" to their adopted families.

All the participants, including 20 exco members who had reached the village at 4pm, were adopted by their new families together with about 40 university students who arrived earlier in the morning.

The 45 foster families were neither too poor nor too rich as most of the breadwinners worked as rubber tappers whose income depended on the price of the commodity.

Kampung Selamat is an unique village. It was opened by a group of Pattanis from Southern Thailand in the 18th century and was named after the village's head as Kampung Tok Soget in the 1920s.

It was later known as Kampung Joget when people congregated every year to attend a water festival where they danced and witnessed a cock fight.

The village was renamed Kampung Selamat in 1975 but outsiders still prefer to call it Kampung Joget.

Hishammuddin's adopted father, Taib Jusoh, 62, who is a branch committee member, claimed the division between Malays only occurred in areas where Pas was dominant while in villages under Umno control, there was no case of kafir-mengkafir or two imams.

He said Kampung Selamat was still "intact" even though it was surrounded by villages that were dominated by Pas, where cases of two imams and Pas members rejecting meat of animals slaughtered by Umno members had happened in the past.

Another branch committee member, Shahidan Ahmad, 45, said in the Sik district, 30 per cent of the voters were neutral and would decide who to vote for during the election based on current political and social developments.

On the Pas influence, Hishammuddin said most of the villagers had realised that Pas could not bring development in Sik and the MP himself seldom visited his constituency.

He said the villagers were now more receptive to explanations by Umno members and the Youth leaders had personally clarified and given Umno's perspective on several major issues.

"Even the students who joined the programme were satisfied with our explanation," he said.

(Pas won the Sik parliamentary seat for three terms in the 70s - two terms when it was in Barisan Nasional - and in the last general election when national laureate Datuk Shanon Ahmad defeated Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Abdul Hamid Othman.)

Hishammuddin expressed satisfaction with the programme, saying all participants had helped their adopted families with their daily chores, including tapping rubber, collecting rubber clumps and cutting the grass to feed the cows.

Some of them, who had never done such chores in their life, enjoyed the activities.

The villagers too were happy with the programme.

"Before this, I always thought the young and successful politicians are different from us. It has never crossed my mind that one of them will be my adopted child," said Taib or Pak Su who had given his best to ensure his adopted child, Hishammuddin, enjoyed his stay at his house.

What made them happier was that all the participants could adapt themselves to the villagers' simple lifestyle and that confirmed Hishammuddin's statement - "There is no difference between us."

Taib, a rubber buyer, and all the villagers are looking forward to future interactions with their adopted children and hoped that when the programme ended, there would be no permanent goodbyes.