

# A hero's welcome for PM

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## Massive crowd at airport for Mahathir's return

PETALING JAYA: When he left the country 10 days ago, Malaysians only had the image of Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad crying at the end of the Umno general assembly.

And there was only a handful of people who were allowed to see him off at the RMAF base in Subang here.

It was a totally different atmosphere at the base yesterday when the Prime Minister returned from a holiday in Italy.

When the jet touched down at 8am, a relaxed-looking Prime Minister emerged and was greeted with thunderous applause by thousands of people, who turned up to give him a hero's welcome.

To the delight of those present, a light aircraft flew around the base carrying a banner bearing the words "*Dr Mahathir, Kepulanganmu Dinantikan*" (Dr Mahathir, We Await Your Return).

From the aircraft to the VIP room, Dr Mahathir slowly made his way through the crowd, shaking hands with those present.

On hand to receive Dr Mahathir and his wife Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali were Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, Information Minister Tan Sri Khalil Yaakob and Cabinet ministers, including Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik, Datuk Lim Ah Lek, Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz, Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak and Datuk Hishammuddin Hussein.

Dr Mahathir, who was dressed in a dark blue t-shirt and a black coat, was cheerful and obliging when he answered questions during a 15-minute press conference.

Immediately after the press conference, he was ushered outside to address the people who had been waiting for him since 6am.

Some of the people were wearing t-shirts with a picture of Dr Mahathir's face on them while others were holding on to banners carrying messages such as "*Kami Sayangkan Dr Mahathir*" (We Love You Dr Mahathir) and "*Kami Masih Perlukan Dr Mahathir*" (We Still Need You Dr Mahathir).

Apart from members of Barisan Nasional coalition parties, about 100 university students from Universiti Teknologi Malaysia and Universiti Teknologi Mara also came carrying banners expressing their appreciation for Dr Mahathir's leadership.

Twenty-year-old Noorsyarini Rosaria Noordin said the students had taken the trouble to make the banners the night before, just in time for the reception.

"When we heard about his resignation, we were shocked as it was an unbelievable announcement," she said.

Also present to show support was about 100 PAS members from Perak, said a 66-year-old committee member who did not wish to be named.

Although they did not carry banners or party flags, she said they took part in the reception to show their support and respect for the nation's leader.

"It was his plan to step down and we respect that decision, although the transition period should be extended as his guidance and advice were still needed in government policy-making and other duties," she said.