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A big 'welcome home' for Dr M

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SUBANG, Wed. - They came by the busloads, arriving as early as 4.30am and waited patiently as the cool morning turned humid, until four hours later, he finally emerged to meet them.

The 10,000 strong crowd stood outside the Air Movement building at the Royal Malaysian Air Force base in Subang to welcome Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad who returned early this morning from a 10-day break in Naples, Italy.

For the crowd, it was not merely a welcome; it was their chance to tell the Prime Minister how they felt about his resignation, which takes effect next October.

"We love you! We need you!" screamed the words of a banner, one of a dozen others bearing the sentiments of the people.

"Dr Mahathir, your leadership is still needed", "Hero of our Homeland", "Dr. Mahathir, we will always be with you" and "Malaysia Boleh because of your leadership".

There was more. Puteri Umno Selangor's banner proclaimed "Jangan tinggalkan kami ayahanda/Penyambut Kelahiran kami/Kami tak rela melepaskanmu" (Don't leave us, father/You greeted our birth/We cannot let you go).

"Kami waris perjuanganmu yang belum selesai" (We are the heirs of your unfinished struggle), the banner from Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (Johor) said.

The welcoming gathering was organised by Umno, but the main component parties of the Barisan Nasional - including the MCA, MIC, Gerakan and the People's Progressive Party - also made their presence felt, as did groups of students and journalists, from both the foreign and local Press.

There were occasional shouts of "Hidup Mahathir!" by groups of Umno Youth members. Wanita Umno and Wanita MCA members were seen fanning themselves as the morning grew warmer. Umno Youth member Ehsan Mohd Zan, walked around with a friend selling tags bearing Dr Mahathir's picture to be worn around the neck. Ehsan, from Umno Sungai Tua, Gombak, said they had made 500 tags and were selling them for RM5 each.

In the throng were Norhayati Fadhil, 16, from Sungai Siput, Perak, who skipped school for a chance to see the Prime Minister in person.

"He has contributed so much to the country and I am afraid that his resignation could cause turbulence," said the student, who was with her brother Mohd Hazim, 4, and mother Latipah Abu Talib, 47. They had travelled from Kuala Kangsar with other Umno Sungai Siput members, leaving at 1am and arriving at 4.30am.

Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM) student Anwar P.P. Abdul Majeed, 19, said he and about 120 other students were here with UiTM deputy vice-chancellor Prof Nassuddin Othman and some lecturers.

"We are not cutting classes; we've been given an exemption to be here."

MCA Bandar Kota Tinggi branch chairman Tan Piah Sung said it cost RM1,500 to charter a bus to and fro. He brought along 40 branch members.

"Dr Mahathir's resignation saddens us and we don't accept it. But in the end we respect his wish," Tan said.

Also spotted in the crowd were celebrities, among them TV host Jalaluddin Hassan, and actresses Erma Fatima and Angelina Tan.

Up in the air, a small aeroplane pulled a banner reading: "Dr. M - kepulanganmu dinantikan" (Dr M - your return is eagerly awaited).

Finally, at 8.35am, the Prime Minister emerged from the building where he had held a Press conference upon his arrival.

The crowd roared to life and those near the building entrance began to surge towards him, reaching out their hands to touch him. Looking slightly overwhelmed, Dr Mahathir shook hands with whoever he could.

Police and some Umno Youth members formed a human chain to prevent the crowd from surging forward as Dr Mahathir walked towards the stage.

The shouts of "Hidup Mahathir!" and applause grew even louder as he took to the stage, joined by his wife Datuk Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali, Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, Umno leaders and Cabinet Ministers.

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