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King joins the people in celebrations

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MALACCA, Sat. - Malaysians of all races, religions and walks of life tonight demonstrated the country's uniqueness when they thronged the Hang Tuah Mall to celebrate the national Christmas open house.

In the true spirit of tolerance and understanding, dignitaries and ordinary people attended an event common in Malaysia during major festivals.

The more than 100,000 crowd mirrored those who turned up for the Hari Raya open house in Jitra, Kedah, last week.

They came in their festive best, some with children in tow, and stayed on even after the event officially closed for the night.

The large turnout saw the 1.5km mall, launched recently by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, having only standing room. People mingled freely, making the tourists present feel very much at home and amazed by the camaraderie and kinship that exist among all Malaysians.

It is this interaction that has held the country together and will propel it to greater heights in future.

The event was organised by the State Government and Culture, Arts and Tourism Ministry.

The guests of honour were the Yang di-Pertuan Agong Tuanku Syed Sirajuddin and Raja Permaisuri Agong Tuanku Fauziah.

Dr Mahathir and his wife Datuk Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali were also present.

Among the dignitaries were Yang di-Pertua Negeri Tun Syed Ahmad Shahabudin and Toh Puan Marfuza Sheikh Osman, Chief Minister Datuk Seri Mohd Ali Rustam, Cabinet Ministers, deputy ministers and state executive councillors.

Tuanku Syed Sirajuddin and Tuanku Fauziah came to the event in a horse carriage. Syed Ahmad and wife, and Dr Mahathir and Dr Siti Hasmah also arrived in carriages.

They were preceded by Ali and the other dignitaries who arrived in colourful trishaws.

The procession that followed the VIPs was representative of the various communities, among them women in traditional kebaya nyonya, the Portuguese in their traditional dress and even Santa Clauses and Santarinas who added colour and gaiety to the night.

The King opened the event by switching on the lights on a Christmas tree. Lights on all trees and decorations in the area were simultaneously lit up.

This followed performances of the dances of the various races in the country.

A 10-minute glittering fireworks display capped the night.

The crowd, which started arriving from 6pm, was entertained by various performers and cultural shows.

Six giant TV screens put up along the thoroughfare helped guests follow the proceedings at the main stage.

A choir comprising 500 men and women from churches here was among the attractions.