

Asean leaders pay tribute to Dr M at farewell summit

SUN - 8 OCT 2003

NUSA DUA (Bali): Southeast Asian leaders, including a tearful Indonesian president, paid tribute yesterday to one of their most forceful and outspoken colleagues, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, at his farewell summit.

Asia's longest-serving elected leader steps down on Oct 31 after 22 years in power.

Indonesia's Megawati Sukarnoputri, host of the Asean summit, choked back tears as she delivered a tribute to Mahathir and presented a memento - a photograph of Asean leaders signed by all of them.

"The mark of his statesmanship has been implanted deep in our consciousness. The reach of his mind is so far and wide," she said, hailing Mahathir as a "steadfast friend and respected colleague".

"He always has strong and informed views and never hesitated to say the unpleasant things. There is no way of counting the things he did for

Asean," she said.

"Dr Mahathir may leave office but he will never abandon involvement with Asean."

Asean secretary-general Ong Keng Yong has said the region would lose a "strong, colourful personality" when Mahathir steps down.

"His legacy is his forthright analysis of situations, calling a spade a spade and always coming up with bold ideas," he told AFP.

"He speaks his mind and he has been proven right on many occasions.

"The feeling in Asean is that a strong colourful personality like Dr Mahathir and his style will be missed."

With the exception of Brunei's Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah, who succeeded his father in 1967, Mahathir is the longest serving leader in the grouping.

He is the last of Asean's old guard, who included Ferdinand Marcos of the Philippines, Indonesia's Suharto and Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew.