

Emotional goodbye from former staff

STAR - 1 NOV 2003

BY SA'ODAH ELIAS

PUTRAJAYA: A sterling chapter of the country's history came to a close as the man who had been at the nation's helm for over 22 years clocked out of his office at 5.06pm yesterday.

From that moment on Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad became another retiree, albeit one with a long and illustrious career, mainly as the country's longest-serving Prime Minister.

As he has also stepped down from other posts, the key ones being Finance Minister, Umno president and Barisan Nasional chief, he now maintains just one elected post - Member of Parliament for Kubang Pasu.

Today, Dr Mahathir leaves for a long-deserved vacation.

Accompanied by his wife, Tun Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali, and successor Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, Dr Mahathir stepped out from the Prime Minister's office as an ordinary *rakyat*.

The short walk across the lobby of the PM's Department and down the steps to their waiting limousine took about 20 minutes, as at every step, Dr Mahathir and Dr Siti Hasmah were mobbed by about two thousand civil servants who had waited in the blistering evening sun to greet and wish them well.

It was an emotional goodbye for many of his former staff.

Although Dr Mahathir had announced his planned retirement in June last year, when the actual time came, many could not hold back their feelings.

In one corner of the spacious lobby, several staff members huddled together and sobbed.

Some were downcast because they did not manage to *salam* with Dr Mahathir for the last time.

Those who were able to reach him were almost gleeful. One man who reeled away from the crowd after he shook hands with Dr Mahathir was heard shouting: "*Saya dapat! Saya dapat!* (I got him)."

When an imam recited a prayer for him, Dr Mahathir choked momentarily but he was able to control his feelings. As he moved on, he also accepted last-minutes gifts of his portrait from several secondary school students.

As the couple drew to their limousine, Dr Mahathir waved to the waiting crowd. And in response, they applauded.

At 5.25pm, he and Dr Siti Hasmah got into their car for the short journey back to Seri Perdana.

Hundreds of people lined the road leading towards the gate of the Putra Perdana Complex. And even after they had passed the gate, some 100 people of all races were waiting for him.

They shouted their 'thank

you' and well-wishes and tried to touch the couple.

A brass band from Victoria Institution gathered outside the gates of the Prime Minister's Office to play songs as a tribute to the former Premier.

After keeping his emotions in check after stepping out of the PM's office for the last time, the tears then began to roll down his cheeks.