

26 SEP 2003

Mahathir-Gift

A SPECIAL GIFT TO THE UN FROM THE PEOPLE OF MALAYSIA

By: Salmu Hashim

NEW YORK, Sept 26 (Bernama) -- The people of Malaysia Thursday presented to the United Nations a beautiful "Tepak Sireh" set made of gold and silver, and encrusted with precious gems -- 46 years after becoming a member of the world body.

The specially hand-crafted tepak sireh, which glitters under natural light, is displayed on the third floor of the United Nations building. It sits opposite an imposing and impressive barge -- also made of gold -- from Thailand.

Each member country can present a gift to the UN which is then displayed in the UN building.

The tepak sireh was presented by Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad to Secretary-General Kofi Annan, minutes before the prime minister delivered his final speech as head of government at the 58th UN General Assembly.

Dr Mahathir explained to Annan the significance of the gift. In olden days, the tepak sireh, a container for betel leaves, was a significant part of conversations, negotiations and important ceremonies in the royal courts, village gatherings and in the homes of ordinary people.

The betel leaf is offered to guests as an ice-breaker. The tepak sireh remains today as a centrepiece of traditional ceremonies.

"The tepak sireh is thus an important symbol of diplomacy, dialogue, friendship and cooperation," Dr Mahathir said, adding " This is what the United Nations symbolises and should stand for during these trying times."

"The tepak sireh set, supported by four traditional Malay weapons securely sheathed in their scabbard, testified to the peaceful intentions of the Malaysian people and their hope for everlasting peace, he said.

Annan, in accepting the gift, said: "There is no more fitting or important message that Malaysia could send to the world at this difficult time in human affairs."

"That message is well in keeping with Malaysia's constructive and committed role as a member state of the United Nations -- as a contributor to UN peace operations; and as a leading voice for developing and non-aligned nations as well as a promoter of dialogue and understanding among the peoples of the world," he said.

"That makes your nation particularly well equipped to host next month's summit of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference, which, given the events of the past year in your region and beyond, promises to be one of the most important in the history of the OIC, " Annan said.

The tepak sireh set is arranged on a tray surrounded by 14 condiment vessels or "cembuls" representing the 13 states and the Federal Territory. The main box is supported by four traditional weapons -- Keris Semenanjung, Keris Tanjung, Parang Ilang and Tumbuk Lada.

Designed by Henry Bong and produced by Pucuk Rebung Royal Gallery Museum, the concept was originally conceived by Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar.

-- BERNAMA

SH AHH JK