

21 JUN 2003

Mahathir-Greetings

PEOPLE JOSTLE TO SHAKE HANDS WITH DR M

KUALA LUMPUR, June 21 (Bernama) -- Hundreds of people jostled outside the Dewan Merdeka at the Putra World Trade Centre to shake hands with Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad when the 54th Umno General Assembly ended today.

Regardless of age, they scrambled to get to the front on both sides of the red carpet rolled out for Dr Mahathir to pass through from the main entrance of Dewan Merdeka to the media conference room.

As soon as the "Negara Ku" song ended followed by praises to Prophet Muhammad, marking the end of the assembly, the crowd rushed to the main door of the hall, prompting the security personnel to form a "human shield."

The moment Dr Mahathir stepped out of the hall, shouts of "Hidup Mahathir!" (Long Live Mahathir) and "Hidup Umno!" (Long Live Umno) erupted from among the crowd.

Amidst the pushing and shoving among the crowd, suddenly there were shouts that some people were stepping on other people's legs.

Some of them nearly fell while others got their heads knocked against the cameras of press photographers who also struggled among the crowd to snap a best shot of Dr Mahathir's actions at the assembly, the last for him as prime minister and party president.

"It's enough," a man in the crowd was heard saying.

With a broad smile, holding the right hand of Dr Mahathir, the man turned back looking for his friend to tell him that he had shook hands with the country's No 1 leader.

Several reporters, who were assigned to get comments from Umno leaders, grumbled upon seeing the leaders they were looking for being far separated by "a sea of people."

Dr Mahathir's walk from Dewan Merdeka to the Media Conference Room, which is about 20 metres, might be a major challenge to the prime minister's bodyguards.

They were seen tensed up as besides ensuring Dr Mahathir's safety, they must also protect themselves from being pushed away by the crowd.

Nevertheless, Dr Mahathir, who was cool and calm, smiled when entering the Media Conference Room.

He was followed shortly by Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and Information Minister Tan Sri Khalil Yaakob while adjusting their clothes and songkok.

During the media conference, Dr Mahathir answered reporters' questions calmly with a smile.

In fact, he also took provocative questions from the foreign media in his stride.

After the media conference, Dr Mahathir left the room, without being "harassed" by reporters asking for his autograph.

Outside, Dr Mahathir was mobbed again by the crowd to the extent that his movements were obstructed at one point.

Earlier, the staircase to Level 4, which housed the Dewan Merdeka, was sealed to prevent the people from going up as it was already congested with people.

Those who did not have the chance to listen to the speeches at Dewan Merdeka, they were asked to sit cross-legged outside the hall and follow the proceedings via the big screen.

Although many followed the proceedings closely on television, others were seen shopping at the stalls set up at the lobby on the second floor.

Whatever their intentions may be, this year's assembly is extraordinary with a huge crowd turning up as compared to previous years.

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