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## Ushering in Chinese New Year with gaiety

KUALA LUMPUR, Fri. - Malaysians ushered in the Chinese New Year yesterday with joy and gaiety, making a beeline to the open house hosted by government leaders nationwide and thronging shopping malls.

While the playing with firecrackers is banned, its sound could be heard sporadically, ignited by the diehards. But the real lively noise came from the drums and gongs of lion dances which were in demand, especially in affluent neighbourhoods.

Ang pows were given by the elders to children and teenagers in the hundreds of thousands. Traditional Chinese New Year meals made their welcome appearance along with the usual Malaysian cuisine of satay, fried mee and teh tarik.

For the first day of the year of the monkey, the place to be were the MCA open house at Wisma MCA, Jalan Ampang, and the Gerakan open house at Menara PGRM in Cheras.

Guests began converging at the first place as early as 8.30am and were welcomed by a lion dance and MCA president Datuk Seri Ong Ka Ting and wife Datin Seri Wendy Ong.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak, accompanied by his wife, Datuk Rosmah Mansor, and Cabinet Ministers and their families, led the way.

However, it was the turnout of former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Tun Dr Siti Hasmah Mohamed Ali that excited the crowd who waited outside the entrance to see the VIPs walk by.

The cheers and claps were sincere, especially from P. Selvaraj, a 48-year-old disabled man who came from Kajang to see Dr Mahathir and shake hands with him.

D. Panierselvam, 12, from Pandan Indah, was ecstatic when he got to shake hands with Dr Siti Hasmah.

Before leaving the function, Dr Siti Hasmah said she was pleased to see Malaysians and foreigners rejoicing.

"This kind of unity and harmony should continue," she said, a sentiment echoed by former MCA president Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik who said it was "nice to see everyone mingling, regardless of race and age as it resembles the true spirit of a harmonious Malaysia".

Guests were entertained to performances by the China Beijing Opera and a fashion show by designers Eric Tho and Nazleen Che Md Noor.

At the Gerakan open house hosted by its president, Datuk Seri Dr Lim Keng Yaik, guests not only savoured a delicious spread, but were also entertained by traditional Chinese music and two artists displaying their skills at traditional Chinese paper cutting and figurine-sculpting.

Speaking at the function, Abdullah said the celebration was heralded with enthusiasm by all Malaysians enjoying economic prosperity and political stability.

MIC president Datuk Seri S. Samy Vellu, who attended with wife Datin Seri Indrani, wanted the unity to be the cornerstone in achieving the common vision for a better Malaysia.

If Malaysians enjoyed the occasion, foreign tourists were simply awed.

Erik Dienske, 32, and his sister Marieke, 30, from Amsterdam, here on a three-week vacation, were amazed that national leaders joined in the Chinese New Year celebrations with the people.

"It is nice to see how friendly leaders are with everyone," he said. "In

our country, it is not often that leaders get together with people in celebrating festivals like this. It is a wonderful environment, really. Back home, the Chinese community celebrates modestly."

In Seremban, Menteri Besar Tan Sri Mohd Isa Samad, who is also State Barisan Nasional chairman, joined thousands of guests at the MCA and Gerakan open house held respectively at the Seremban Municipal Council hall and the Gerakan head office in Jalan Temiang.

An acrobatic show by a team from Yunan, China, was the highlight of the open house at the MCA open house while a fashion show showcased the Gerakan open house.

In Ipoh, Perak Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Tajol Rosli Ghazali said the Year of the Monkey was believed to be prosperous and one should not miss the opportunity to venture into new areas which could turn out to be lucrative and rewarding.

"Monkeys are known to be clever and resourceful and if we can adopt such characteristics we can succeed in any undertaking. Malaysia is a small country, but we have many intelligent and hardworking people who have made waves locally and globally."