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Ushering in New Year with hopes of joy and continued prosperity

KUALA LUMPUR, Thurs. - At the stroke of midnight last night, Malaysians welcomed 2004, with hope that the New Year brings joy, prosperity and continued peace.

While the main celebrations were held here, the States did not miss out in marking the arrival of the first leap year of the century, as parties on a grand scale were held with thousands of the multi-ethnic people joining in.

In Pulau Pangkor, the Raja Muda of Perak Raja Nazrin Shah joined more than 3,000 islanders at the Dataran Pangkor to usher in the New Year.

Held for the first time on the island, the New Year celebration was to coincide with the year-end Pangkor Carnival and the official launch of TV3's Sure Heboh Carnival 2004.

Prior to the midnight celebration, Raja Nazrin officially opened the Dataran Pangkor which is situated in Pasir Bogak about 3km from the Pangkor jetty.

Throughout the night till the celebration ended at 2am today, the crowd was entertained by pop queen Siti Nurhaliza and other performers, including Waheeda, Koprata, Naqui Boboy, Shamsul Ghau Ghau, Amok and Aris Ariwatan.

The world's top dragon dance group from Johor - the 24-member Tang Long Imperial - wowed the crowd with its performance using a 30m silk dragon.

The highlight of the celebration was the fireworks display which went off at midnight. Soon after, Raja Nazrin officially launched the Sure Heboh Carnival 2004 by lighting up a cannon confetti. Joining the celebration were Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Mohd Tajol Rosli Ghazali and State Secretary Datuk Dr Isahak Yeop Mohd Shar.

In Ipoh, dozens of city folk thronged Dataran Ipoh to welcome 2004. The event began with City Council singers belting out several songs, including oldies, accompanied by the Kugiran Dimensi band.

Among the crowd were Datuk Bandar Ipoh Datuk Sirajuddin Salleh and several city councillors.

Sirajuddin read out a poem as a tribute to former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad whose images were displayed on a screen.

At the stroke of midnight, the crowd shouted "Happy New Year" and it was followed with the raising of the Jalur Gemilang and singing of the national anthem. A 30-minute fireworks lit up the skies.

In Butterworth, more than 50,000 people jammed Dataran Pemuda Merdeka in Jalan Bagan Luar to usher in the New Year. The crowd gathered at the field as early as 8pm to join in the countdown at the stroke of midnight, where a stunning 20-minute display of fireworks lit up the sky, amidst shouts of "Happy New Year".

They were also entertained earlier by a chingay procession, lion dance, bicycle acrobatics and self-defence demonstrations as well as cultural dances and songs by local artistes.

Present were Chief Minister Tan Sri Dr Koh Tsu Koon, State Executive Councillors and other dignitaries. Koh later took the stage to lead the countdown where he was also joined by local artistes.

In Kota Kinabalu, thousands of people went for a midnight dip in the moonlit South China Sea to wash away their "bad luck".

The Tanjung Aru Beach and Tanjung Lipat waterfront stretch was packed with people and cars.

The recently opened Waterfront outlet was also a hive of activities as people from all walks of life gathered at the numerous food and entertainment outlets to celebrate the New Year.

Five-star hotels Shangri-La Tanjung Aru Beach Resort and Sutera Harbour each had its own New Year countdown party.