

18/09/2003

People of Sabah put on great show in Merdeka celebration finale

Joniston Bangkuai

DESPITE the possibility of a downpour, the people of Sabah came out in full force for the closing ceremony of the Merdeka Month celebrations in Kota Kinabalu on Tuesday.

The unpredictable weather was not a factor as everyone was in a festive mood. They were there to show their gratitude for the peace and prosperity they have enjoyed since independence.

There was a slight drizzle midway but it did not in any way dampen the spirits of the estimated 100,000 people. They stood their ground right to the end of the programme.

The crowd started streaming into the Likas Sports Complex as early as at 2pm. They have probably made up their minds from the outset that they would enjoy the celebrations whether rain or shine. Every nook of the sports complex was filled.

The people of Sabah were indeed intent on demonstrating their spirit of patriotism and love for the country.

They came from all walks of life and from all corners of Sabah, some from as far as Semporna, Lahad Datu, Tawau, Sandakan and Kudat.

Even the disabled did not want to be left out as they came in droves to watch proceedings on a specially erected screen at the complex. Their presence made the gathering the largest ever in the history of Sabah, and perhaps Malaysia.

Merdeka Month organising chairman Datuk Abdul Kadir Sheikh Fadzir said it was the largest Merdeka Day celebrations he had ever seen.

"Sabah has set a new benchmark in terms of attendance," Abdul Kadir said in his speech, to loud applause and cheers from the crowd.

Some may want to argue that it was the live performances by popular singers Siti Nurhaliza, Camelia, Abu Bakar Ellah and students from Akademi Fantasia which attracted the crowd.

But the loud shouts of Merdeka that reverberated around the complex and the way the crowd sang patriotic songs while waving mini Jalur Gemilang suggested otherwise.

As a gesture of appreciation, the State Government declared yesterday (Sept 17) a public holiday as a token of appreciation for the people of Sabah, especially those who had worked tirelessly to make the event a resounding success.

In announcing the public holiday at the end of the ceremony, Chief Minister Datuk Musa Aman said independence has given the people of Sabah, and all Malaysians, an opportunity to enjoy prosperity and development.

"Independence means a lot to the people of Sabah," he said.

The public holiday was indeed a fitting way of recognising the support of those who have helped make the celebrations a success, especially those who spent hours on the road to come to the event.

Some had come to pay tribute to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad who will be retiring next month.

This was evident when the crowd erupted in cheers at the end of a special video clip aired as a tribute to Dr Mahathir for his invaluable service and contribution to the country.

"I thought Dr Mahathir was coming," said an elderly man who endured a seven-hour drive from Tawau with the hope of shaking Dr Mahathir's hand.

The people of Sabah can be excused for being in a celebratory mood as the closing ceremony coincided with the day Sabah, then known as British

North Borneo, together with Sarawak, Singapore and Malaya formed the federation of Malaysia in 1963.

Sept 16 is also gazetted as the official birthday of the Yang di-Pertua Negeri to mark the Malaysia Day.

The event organising chairman Datuk Anifah Aman and members of his organising committee deserve a pat on their backs for a job well done.

Indeed, Sabah and its people have provided a perfect culmination to the month-long Merdeka celebrations.