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Revelry in the rain as New Year dawns

MALAYSIANS showed their irrepressible party spirit last night as fears of possible terror attacks in major cities worldwide had no effect on the nation's jubilant welcoming of 2003.

Dazzling lights, colourful carnivals and glittering fireworks ushered in the New Year with thousands of merry-makers thronging public squares, streets and nightspots, unfazed by the jitters felt elsewhere.

London's Trafalgar Square was closed for New Year's Eve this year amid terror alerts and British revellers were urged by the police to stay away from central areas of the capital, while international news agencies reported that New Year celebrations in several other countries such as the United States and Australia had been scaled down, cancelled or accompanied by a huge security force.

Undaunted revellers in Malaysia, which included many tourists, thronged the streets in major towns which were decorated and all lit up.

Despite rain in several locations earlier in the evening, celebrations proceeded unabated.

At the Kuala Lumpur City Centre (KLCC), thousands of people from all walks of life packed the area and were treated to a spectacular show of giant inflatables, martial arts demonstrations and performances by magicians and fire-eaters.

The crowd, which included many tourists and expatriates, was also thrilled by cultural performances like the wayang kulit. Singers like Nora and others also put up a good show.

At the stroke of midnight, a stunning display of fireworks filled the skies.

Minutes before the countdown, 10 BASE (Building, Antenna, Spans and Earth) jumpers did an "extreme dive" from the 73rd floor of the Petronas Twin Towers.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who arrived at 10.30pm, told the 100,000-odd crowd later that he hoped Malaysia stayed peaceful and its citizens prosperous.

Asked by a foreign reporter on what he thought of the celebrations, Dr Mahathir said all races of Malaysia and foreigners had come together to usher in the New Year and "the spirit was there".

At Dataran Merdeka, the people, most of them families with young children, gathered since 9pm to usher in the New Year against the backdrop of a brightly-lit Sultan Abdul Samad Building.

At the stroke of 12, the crowd, who had by then numbered around 10,000, was treated to a five-minute fireworks display from Padang Merbok.

In Jalan Bukit Bintang, revellers dining at the Bintang Walk restaurants and sidewalk cafes stared incredulously into the famous streets as it began to rain at 8pm.

But the weather did not dampen their mood or the spirit of New Year's eve as many took a wet stroll, savouring the last hours of 2002.

Balloon pedlars were seen battling their colourful balloons in the wind.

The rain later eased to a drizzle and the mood picked up again as more people arrived, dressed up to the nines to welcome the New Year.

The crowd also gathered around Sungei Wang Plaza, watching the exciting performances that started with a hair and fashion show.

At the stroke of midnight, thousands ushered in 2003 with a thunderous roar and a dazzling fireworks display filled the skies.

Performances organised by YTL Corporation Berhad and held on a stage set up at Starhill, got the crowd grooving as early as 7pm until 1am on New Year's Day.

Bands like Pop Shuvit, the Teh Tarik Crew and Poetic Ammo, and solo artistes Reefa and Jason Lo rocked the crowd.

More than 1,000 police personnel assisted by Rela members were on duty in Kuala Lumpur more for traffic and crowd control than for security.

Around the city, lights were strung from big trees, appearing like glowing vines, along Jalan Raja, Jalan Kuching and Jalan Bukit Bintang while decorative lights were on lamp-posts along many other roads.

At Bangsar Baru, the celebration centred in Jalan Telawi Tiga. Thousands of people, mainly youngsters, waited along the road or patronised the cafes and pubs awaiting the New Year.

The area turned into a huge "street disco" as music blared from speakers situated at strategic points along the streets.

In Ipoh, thousands joined newly-appointed Datuk Bandar Sirajuddin Salleh at Dataran Ipoh to usher in the New Year.

The crowd flocked to the city's landmark as early as 7pm despite a light shower. They were entertained to Malay, Chinese and Indian cultural dances and songs by artistes.

Sirajuddin led the crowd to a countdown of the New Year and thereafter to the raising of the Jalur Gemilang.

Immediately after, the skies were lit up by fireworks followed by a specially-composed New Year song by the City Council chorus.

The city folk also flocked at various venues to catch shows by numerous performing arts groups.

Youths and young professionals were also seen bar-hopping at the Ipoh Garden East entertainment area which has a dozen of pubs and bistros.

Streets in the area, dubbed as Ipoh's "Mini Bangsar", were transformed into an open-air disco where most of the patrons danced away.

Higher up were New Year celebrations in Genting Highlands, where the "Let's Celebrate! Year-End Festivities at Genting" entertained party-

goers.

In Penang, some 100,000 people celebrated at various popular nightspots.

At midnight, fog-horns of ferries and ships sounded as fireworks display and a Welcome 2003 Concert drew more than 60,000 revellers to the Esplanade, George Town.

About 50,000 crowded the municipal field in Jalan Bagan Luar, Butterworth, to witness a Chingay procession and a concert that followed.

As seconds ticked away, Chief Minister Tan Sri Dr Koh Tsu Koon, who joined the revellers at Esplanade, and Deputy Chief Minister Datuk Dr Hilmi Yahaya, who was in the municipal field, led State VIPs in the New Year countdown.

A 10-minute fireworks display amid shouts of "Happy New Year" filled the air and vehicles, with horns blaring, crawled along.

In Kuching, Sarawak Tourism Year 2003 kicked off in a glittering ceremony at Padang Merdeka.

Thousands of people, including foreign tourists, watched the launch by Yang di-Pertua Negeri Tun Abang Muhammad Salahuddin Abang Barieng.

Several artistes and cultural troupes entertained the crowd who had come as early as 6pm.

Sarawak Tourism Minister Datuk Seri Abang Johari Tun Abang Openg said STY, the first to be organised by the State Government, was to create awareness of Sarawak and its rich cultural and natural wonders to the world.

"It will be a stimulus to diversify our economic base," he said.