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Stay united, focused lest Umno and country perish...(HL)

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KUALA LUMPUR, Thurs. - In his last opening address at the Umno general assembly, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad dealt at length on the future threats to the party and country, and pleaded with everyone to remain united and focused, lest Umno and the country perish.

The Umno president and Prime Minister, speaking calmly but passionately, urged party members to sacrifice and put party and nation above self - an advice he had consistently given and not about to stop giving.

Dr Mahathir took one-and a-half hours to deliver his speech. This was the 22nd time he had given the opening address to the general assembly - the first in 1982.

In light purple baju Melayu tailored at his favourite shop in Pekan Rabu, Alor Star, and holding back the tears, Dr Mahathir said:

"Remember, our struggle is for the honour and progress of our race, our religion and our homeland. The high positions are for enabling us to make a success of our struggle, and are not the objective of our struggle.

"If we ourselves do not get this high position but those who get are successful in achieving our objectives, we should not be disappointed. The success of our race, our religion, our country will be enjoyed by us also.

"And we, too, will be honoured and highly regarded. Instead, if because of our unseemly struggle the party is weakened, we may lose everything."

The Dewan Merdeka was packed as delegates, observers, ambassadors, leaders from the component parties of the Barisan Nasional and other guests waited for Dr Mahathir's arrival. Accompanied by senior party leaders, Dr Mahathir walked in to applause from the floor and waved to the crowd.

His speech titled Future Threats - centred on developments in and outside the party. He started with changes that had taken place in Malaysia amidst changes taking place elsewhere in the world.

The audience, expecting an emotional address, maintained their silence until towards the end of the speech when Dr Mahathir said:

"This is the last time that I can deliver the speech to officially open the Umno general assembly. I crave your pardon if I took too much time. I truly wish to repay the party which had given me opportunities to realise my ideas on restoring the honour of my race and people, to help them and my country progress.

"It is not for me to say whether I have succeeded or not. The people and history will judge and determine whether my service was good or bad.

"I value very much the support of Umno, the Malays and other Bumiputeras and the people of Malaysia and I am grateful and I thank them all. I crave your pardon for the mistakes and wrongs that I have committed during the length of my leadership with this blessed party."

The delegates then gave him a standing ovation.

At last year's general assembly, in his winding-up speech, Dr Mahathir shocked the nation when he announced his intention to resign from all political and government posts.

He was unable to finish his speech when stunned Umno supreme council members rushed to persuade him to withdraw his announcement.

Three days later, on June 25, the supreme council announced that Dr Mahathir had withdrawn his resignation and would continue to serve as Prime Minister until October this year.

Today, in between applause and sips of water, and reiterating his

previous advice, Dr Mahathir said Umno members must be ready to make sacrifices in order to get a lot of benefits.

"Ask yourself if it is true that we have got nothing at all because we are not branch leaders or division leaders, members of the supreme council, election candidates or Members of Parliament or Ministers or a Prime Minister.

"The answer is that we all get something. Because of that, stop the personal struggle and ensure the success of the party. People who sabotage the party should not be in the party. The traitor within is far more dangerous than the declared enemy. Do not betray the party and our own race."

Asking members to look beyond in a speech in which he spelt out possible external and internal threats, Dr Mahathir also shared his thoughts on a wide range of issues ranging from democracy (which he said is the best system of government but not without defects), the unilateral decision of "regime change" by others, to the need to continue to be competitive and the need to know Europeans.

But it was when he articulated on Umno that got the crowd excited. He argued that the Opposition is not strong and that it cannot defeat Umno.

"But Umno can defeat Umno. I need not elaborate. We all know. The Opposition did not win. Only Umno had lost. If I may repeat, our struggle is not over. There are still many things that we have to do.

"Umno, I repeat, is not just any party. Umno is the backbone and prime mover of the party which rules this beloved country. If Umno is strong, then the Barisan Nasional will be strong, the Malaysian Government will be strong and Malaysia will be strong. A weak Umno will bring disaster to all of us.

"Truly, Umno cannot lose if our loyalty to the party, to our religion and to our race is not weakened by self-interest. There is no political party anywhere which has been more successful in restoring the honour of the race as Umno has... Do not allow our personal disappointment to destroy again the honour of our race."

Dr Mahathir, who has been president of Umno since 1981, was confident that the country could handle foreign and domestic problems with a strong Government.

But the problems within Umno could not be resolved by the Government. The only ones who can are the party and the members themselves, he said to the applause of the delegates.

He was worried that having been successful for so long, many leaders and members were without the true spirit anymore, but instead give priority to their own self-interests.

The struggle for posts in the party has become so critical that the party's interests, the interest of the Malays and the nation's interest have been pushed aside.