

Braving the storm with the Prime Minister

"IT never occurred to me that when I rushed my husband to the Kuala Lumpur General Hospital, I was rushing in also the Prime Minister of Malaysia," writes Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohamed Ali in a 1990 issue of *Pelita BAKTI*.

It only dawned on her when cardiologist Datuk Dr Robaayah Zambahari told her that Dr Mahathir had had a serious heart attack and that her family and the Deputy Prime Minister should be informed.

"That was when my knees went weak. It was not easy to call the DPM at 1.30am, but I did and also called my brother Tun Ismail and my son-in-law," she told *The Star* in a recent interview.

The nation held its breath when news of the Prime Minister's heart attack and hospitalisation was announced on Jan 19, 1989.

Hours before the attack, Dr Siti Hasmah, Dr Mahathir and their son-in-law were enjoying a feast of Thai food to celebrate the birthday of her son, who was away in Miri!

"I think my husband over ate that night," she said.

She said that at about 11pm, Dr Mahathir felt uneasy about the persistent ache in his shoulders.

The doctor was called and an ECG test confirmed their fears.

"Time was precious as I packed up some essentials, slipped a *baju kurung* over my night gown and rushed my husband to the hospital," she said.

The reception at the KLGH was dramatic with doctors and nurses all over the Prime Minister, leaving no place for a worried wife to hold even her husband's finger.

"He had never been ill before and disliked being pricked so I stood in a corner where he could still see me and prayed for his recovery."

"It was not easy for a strong and healthy person like him to surrender to the treatment and the nursing procedures," she added.

A visiting American cardiac surgeon and angiogram expert advised surgery for him because the blood

clot was at a critical junction of the heart.

"He gave us two choices — to fly with him to Los Angeles for the surgery or have it performed by cardiac surgeon Yahya Awang here," she said.

Dr Mahathir chose Yahya.

The Prime Minister's children who flew back from Miri, Singapore and the United States kissed their father before he was wheeled into the operation theatre on Jan 24, 1989.

"Dr Robaayah had shown us the operation theatre and let us see how newly operated patients look like so we would not be shocked," she said.

"It was a scary sight for my children but we were grateful as it helped prepare us for when we saw my husband for the first time after surgery," she said.

The surgical and nursing team were superb as they moved around monitoring and operating on him. These were the men and women who saw the Prime Minister's heart.

"Even I, his wife, cannot claim to have been that literally close to his heart," Dr Siti Hasmah joked.

All these happened at a critical Ampang by-election period and rumours were wild about Dr Mahathir's recovery — some even said he was dead!

Nevertheless, Dr Mahathir was declared fit and discharged on Feb 5 with an emotional send off by the hospital staff.

"It was not easy for Malaysians to treat their own Prime Minister. I guess there were some stress and concern, but I assured them that the family gave them their full confidence and support," Dr Siti Hasmah said.

She stressed that Malaysian doctors were fully capable of performing major heart by-passes and there was no need for overseas treatment.

On Dr Mahathir's remarkable recovery, she said it was because he did not smoke.

A word of advice from her: "Take preventive measures now — no smoking, have a balanced diet, exercise, have ample rest, learn CPR and take everything else in moderation."