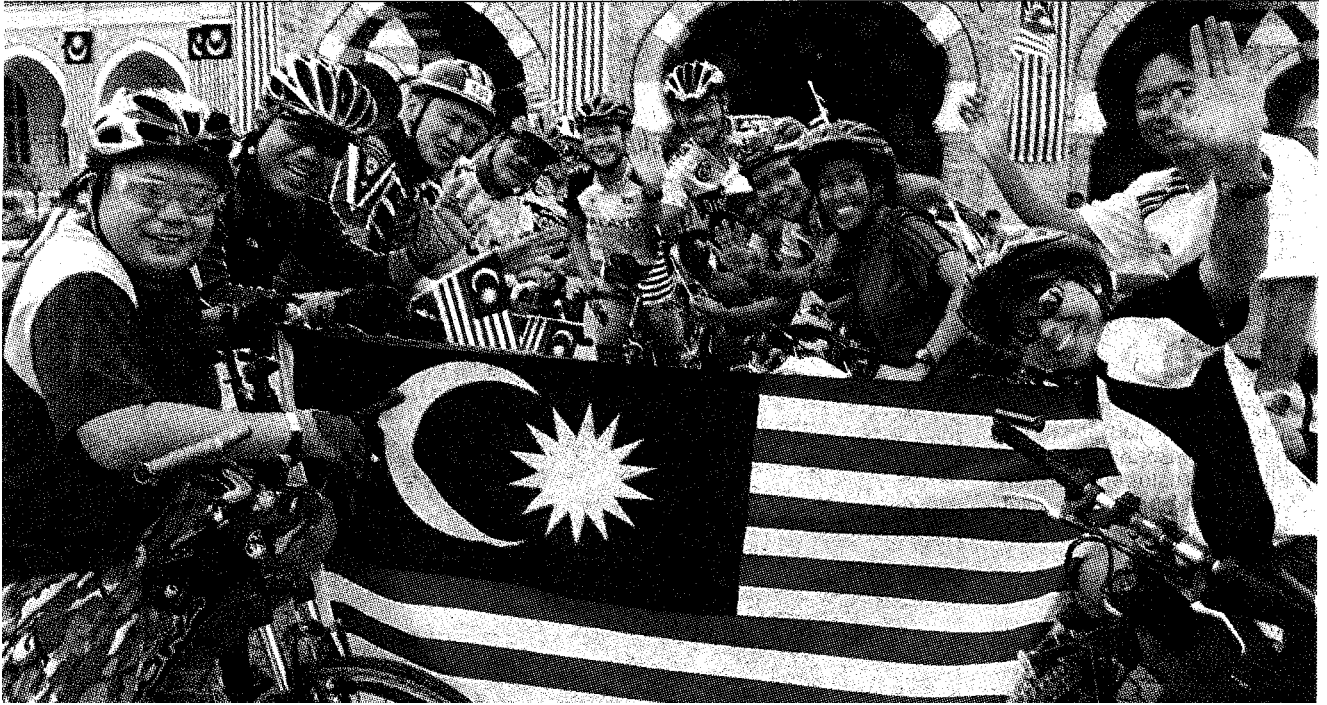


# Malaysia celebrates independence day



KUCHING: Malaysia celebrated its 49th National Day here yesterday with a glittering parade and procession involving the different groups of its multiracial and multi-religious society.

The King Tuanku Syed Sirajuddin Syed Putra Jamalullail, the Queen Tuanku Fauziah Tengku Abdul Hashid and national leaders joined thousands of flag-waving Malaysians in watching the participants make a formation symbolising the framework for national development under the Ninth Malaysia Plan (9MP) and the national mission in the parade held at Padang Merdeka.

While maintaining the theme, "KeranaMu Malaysia", which reflects the people's gratitude for the peace and rapid development that they enjoy, this year's celebration also carries a sub-theme, "National Mission Generates Vision", aimed at highlighting the five main thrusts of the 9MP.

Padang Merdeka in the town centre came alive with spirited declarations pledging loyalty to the nation, lively performances by people in colourful attire, uniformed bodies and bands as well as a parade and procession, which ended with a cultural performance by members of the Integrated People's Component

The fine weather added gaiety to the celebration, which is being held here for the second time, the first being in 1995. Thousands more Malaysians

watched the event live on television.

The King and Queen arrived at Padang Merdeka at 7.45am and were received by Culture, Arts and Heritage Minister Datuk Seri Dr Rais Yatim, who chairs the Merdeka Month Celebration National Committee, and his wife Datin Masnah Rais.

The King and Queen were then ushered to the main stage where Sarawak Yang Dipertua Negeri Tun Abang Muhammad Salahuddin Abang Barieng, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak, Sarawak Chief Minister Tan Sri Abdul Taib Mahmud and members of the federal and state cabinets stood waiting.

When the national anthem was played, Royal Malaysian Air Force helicopters made a fly-past carrying the *Jalur Gemilang* and emitting rows of red, blue and yellow smoke.

The King then inspected the guard-of-honour mounted by four officers and 105 other personnel of the 13th Battalion of the Royal Malay Regiment led by Mejar Sani S. Omar. Five hundred students, mostly wearing traditional outfits of the main ethnic groups in Sarawak, then performed the "Sembah Tari" to welcome the King, national leaders and the crowd.

The National Day celebration began with the hoisting of the *Jalur Gemilang* and the rendering of the *Negaraku*,

accompanied by the firing of 14 cannon shots. They were also followed by the *Jalur Gemilang* and *KeranaMu Malaysia* songs.

Eight secondary school students, led by Sekolah Menengah Sains Kuching student head Zulfadli Zahudin, recited the "Rukun Negara" and cried out "Merdeka" seven times.

In PENANG, Opalyn Mok reported that the sleepy town of Balik Pulau came alive with vibrant colours, patriotic songs and cheering crowds on Merdeka morning, where the state-level Merdeka celebration and parade were held this year.

Despite an early morning drizzle and cloudy skies, thousands of people turned up to watch the parade which started at about 10.50am.

More than 9,000 participants from schools, factories and organisations took part in the two-hour parade, which also passed through villages and housing estates.

A villager, Mohd Khairi Mohd Kasim, 38, who brought his family of five to watch the parade in front of the Balik Pulau district mosque, said:

"We walked here as we live very nearby and this is actually the first time my children got to see the parade,"

Penang Yang di-Pertua Negeri Tun Abdul Rahman Abbas was the guest of honour and Chief Minister Tan Sri Dr Koh Tsu Koon was also present.