

Onn's sacrifices remembered

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STARBITES

Lack of understanding

What? It was difficult to get Malays to join a party 60 years ago.

Why? They did not understand the purpose of a party.

BATU PAHAT: When the Pergerakan Melayu Semenanjung Johor started in 1946, it struggled to get the support of the Malays, one of its veteran members noted.

"It was really difficult to persuade the Malays to join the movement.

"They did not understand the purpose of the movement. Independence hardly crossed the minds of people back then," said Maskam Raif, 85.

Maskam was among those who fought for independence along with the movement's founder Datuk Onn Jaafar.

The movement later evolved into the Kongres Melayu Se-Malaya (All Malaya Malay Congress) and Umno as it is

known today.

"Onn's leadership was good and simple. He was focussed and knew that we would only obtain independence by staying united.

"He always reminded us to stay united or all our efforts will fail," said the frail-looking Maskam.

Yesterday, Maskam joined 20,000 young and old members to commemorate Onn's struggles and sacrifices at the Batu Pahat Stadium.

The event was themed Mem-



Maskam: Onn's leadership was good and simple

peringati Perjuangan Datuk Onn: Pengasas Negara Sebuah Bangsa (In memory of the struggles of Datuk Onn: Founder of a nation state).

"It was hard to gather a big crowd those days. People had to walk for miles, or even take a *sampan* (boat) to get to the



PAYING TRIBUTE: (from left) Brig Jen (rtd) Datuk Jaafar Onn, Education Minister Datuk Seri Hishammuddin Tun Hussein joining Abdullah for a prayer during the gathering to commemorate Onn's struggles in Batu Pahat yesterday.

assembly," Maskam said.

He said the only aim of Umno then was to obtain independence.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, who officiated at the function, said Onn's aspirations were being practised today, especially through the power sharing of Umno and other Barisan Nasional component parties.

"Maybe back then there was

not much support for his idea to allow non-Malays to join Umno.

"Even non-Malay leaders were not very supportive of the idea back then," he said, adding that the present power sharing has brought about racial unity.

He said Onn's sacrifices in the fight against the Malayan Union and to restore the powers of the Rulers should never be forgotten as the struggles led to the formation of Umno.

Earlier, Abdullah re-enacted the march by Onn 60 years ago when he led some 6,000 people to the stadium.

(On Feb 10, 1946, Onn, who was Batu Pahat district officer, led 15,000 people in a march to oppose the setting up of the Malayan Union.)

The gathering marks the start of a year-long celebration in Johor to commemorate Onn's sacrifices.