

Changing the rural heartland

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The Prime Minister is determined to give the NCER his full commitment and has appealed to the people to reach out to this rare opportunity.

THE Prime Minister abandoned his written text two-thirds into his speech and began speaking off-the-cuff at the launch of the Northern Corridor Economic Region (NCER) initiative.

Rural issues and agriculture are matters close to Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's heart and he did not need to rely on his written speech.

As motor czar Tan Sri Nasimuddin Amin, who was among the thousands of guests at the Alor Star event noted, "the Prime Minister is clearly very passionate about this project."

Conditions inside the mammoth tent erected for the launch felt like a steaming sauna as the sun rose but the heat and the humidity did not seem to bother the Prime Minister.

He had arrived to the blare of new age music but it was his wife Datin Seri Jeanne Abdullah, clad in a simple sky-blue *baju kurung*, demure pearls around her neck and keeping two steps behind him, whom many guests craned their necks to see.

On his part, he was dressed like the rest of the project team - a white, short-sleeved shirt bearing the Sime Darby logo, the master planner for the NCER initiative.

They make a good-looking couple and it was the first time many locals had seen Jeanne in



the flesh.

Everyone who was somebody in the north was there.

In his speech, Abdullah appealed to the northerners to reach out to this opportunity passing before their eyes because things like these did not come by very often.

He said wealth and well-being were not exclusive only to those who lived in the city. Income generation, he is convinced, must also take place in the rural heartland.

"This is a project for the *rakyat*," he said.

He urged the rural folk to embrace the project and spoke about the circle of wealth.

He put it simply - the private sector would be the main engine of growth in the NCER, the Government would collect tax, and the taxes would be channelled back into amenities and benefits for the people.

"Pak Lah spoke from his heart and with



Keen interest: Abdullah and Jeanne being briefed by Sime Kubota Sdn Bhd head agriculture manager Abd Kadir Karim during their visit to the exhibition booth after launching the NCER initiative in Alor Star yesterday.



sincerity. I believe that if young people see the opportunity for a good income in agro projects, they will want to participate," said Putera Umno chief Datuk Azeez Abdul Rahim who hails from Baling, one of the poorest areas in the north.

Months of thinking and planning went into this ambitious plan for the northern states of Perlis, Kedah, Penang and Perak.

It is a pioneering concept in these parts because regional projects in the past have never transcended state boundaries.

The scheme will see policies involving the four states being overseen by a single coordinating authority that will involve no less than the Prime Minister himself, and including the Mentris Besar Datuk Seri Shahidan Kassim (Perlis), Datuk Seri Mahdzir Khalid (Kedah) and Datuk Seri Tajol Rosli (Perak) and Penang Chief Minister Tan Sri Dr Koh Tsu Koon.

Former MP Datuk Dr Affifuddin Omar, a regional development planner by training, described it as the first effort since Merdeka based on the principle of "organic development."

"Previous regional schemes were bound by state borders, with a great deal of overlapping. The NCER concept means better optimal allocation of resources.

"At last, they are doing it the right way," he said.

The jigsaw puzzle literally fell into place at the launch.

To symbolise the launch, each of the three Mentris Besar and one Chief Minister fitted a piece symbolising their state and bearing their state crest to a jigsaw model.

The fifth and final piece which bore the national symbol was fitted in by the Prime Minister. The challenge now is to ensure that things fit in as smoothly on the ground.

Abdullah is determined to give the NCER his full commitment and some have even suggested that it will be his legacy to his northern roots.

His enthusiasm that morning was evident.

When Mahdzir presented him with a miniature *keris* as a souvenir, Abdullah looked around for a coin in keeping with the local custom of reciprocating sharp gifts of knives or scissors with a coin, the idea being to prevent the friendship from being severed.

By the time Dr Koh fished out a coin, Abdullah quipped: "Never mind, it's not a real *keris*."

It was past midday by the time the speeches were over and many thought he would make the usual cursory tour of the exhibits before settling down for lunch.

But he took close to an hour walking through the exhibition and commenting on the agricultural displays, pausing a number of times to point things out to his wife.

He really enjoyed being there, quite oblivious to the fact that lunch was growing cold and the guests were waiting.

Said Kedah-born businessman and Umno politician, Guntor Tobeng: "At the very least, we see it as a serious attempt at addressing rural issues. But seriously, this looks like the biggest thing that has ever happened to us in the north."