

Saying

goodbye

from their hearts

S 31/10/2003 - 10 PRECISE

The long goodbye is over and so is the end of an era. JOCELINE TAN was on the trial of the last few whirlwind days of Malaysia's fourth Prime Minister.

"HE is leaving in fighting style," said a reporter during the jam-packed press conference by Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, then still just Datuk Seri, in Parliament on Thursday.

Dr Mahathir had just tabled the mid-term review of the Eighth Malaysia Plan to a packed chamber and he fielded questions with his usual aplomb.

The Parliament appearance was one of his last major tasks as Prime Minister and the lobby was teeming with media people and visitors who wanted to be part of this special moment.

The press conference was followed by a photography session with MPs, Parliament staff, technical staff and reporters covering Parliament, including those from *Harakah*.

And when the *Harakah* reporters held out their notebooks for him to sign, Dr Mahathir said with an amused expression, "Dari Harakah?" but signed them with a flourish.

It was a day before the smoothest leadership transition the country had seen.

The last few days had seen Dr Mahathir and Tun Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali keep a punishing pace to oblige the torrent of invitations from groups and individuals who wanted to say goodbye to this extraordinary Malaysian leader.

As the final day drew close, the crowds swirling around him grew more urgent, even a little frenzied. People were trying to catch their last glimpse of him as the Prime Minister, to touch his hand, to be perpetuated in photographs with him or just to wish him well.

"I could see that he had lowered his reserve to make himself accessible to so many people," said Kedah Puteri Umno chief Suraya Yaakob.

But the man himself remained calm and unperturbed - outwardly, at least - through much of the whirlwind of activity.

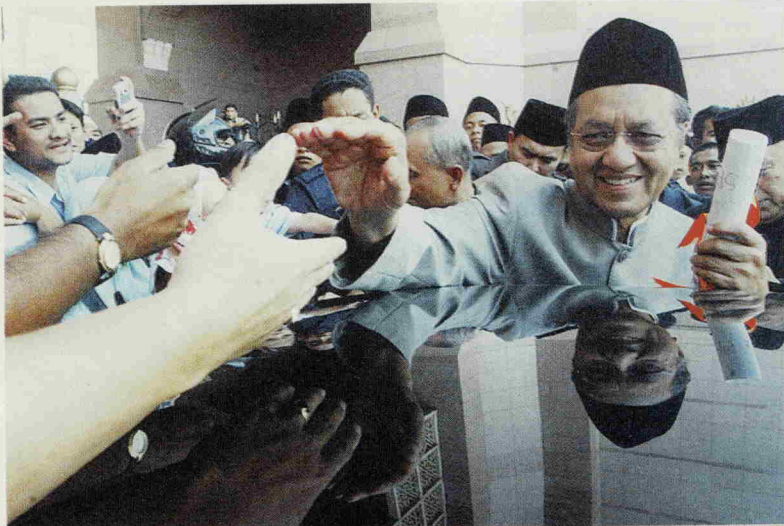
He was determined to work till the very last day. There was no slowing down just because he was retiring.

Early this morning, he was at his Putrajaya desk as usual - looking spruced and bright in an elegant Nehru-collared suit - going through letters on his leather-topped desk, occasionally looking up to smile somewhat mischievously into the camera hovering near him.

In a few hours time, he would be handing over the reins of a proud nation to the fifth Prime Minister of Malaysia.

His work attitude even in these final days did not escape any of his Cabinet ministers as Dr Mahathir settled down for his last and 883rd Cabinet meeting of his Premiership on Wednesday morning.

"He was sending out a very strong message, that just because you are



Dr Mahathir mobbed by well wishers at the Putrajaya mosque after Friday prayers



Reporters clamouring to get Dr Mahathir's autograph after his last press conference as Prime Minister at his Putrajaya office this afternoon.

going to retire doesn't mean you should take it easy," said Entrepreneur Development Minister Datuk Nazri Aziz.

A number of them were surprised at his business-as-usual conduct. "It was very businesslike, yet so sad," said Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar.

Syed Hamid's eyes welled with tears as he watched the Ministers file by to say their farewell to Dr Mahathir.

"He is very special to me especially after having seen the way he carried our nation on the world stage," said Syed Hamid.

When it came to his turn, the Johor politician took the senior man's hand tightly in both of his own and bent his head low to kiss it.

"I have been crying for days! I have known him since his days as a doctor in

Alor Star," said Arts and Tourism Minister Datuk Paduka Abdul Kadir Sheikh Fadzir whose office is lined with pictures of the two Prime Ministers Kedah has produced. The other was, of course, Tunku Abdul Rahman.

Incredibly, Dr Mahathir held on to his composure despite the emotions swelling all around him. It was an incredible test of his discipline and self-control.

But the dam had broken rather unexpectedly a day earlier, during what was supposed to be the routine monthly gathering of the Finance Ministry.

Dr Mahathir had arrived at the plaza fronting the ministry, sharp at the dot of 10am and spoke for about 20 minutes, touching on the need for diligence, hard work and discipline.

Everyone then sang *Pahlawan*, a severities song that has caught on after

RTM began airing it everyday just before primetime news. It is a beautiful and touching ballad about the struggles of a warrior and that was when his composure crumbled.

He stood there, his hands clasped in front of him, head slightly bowed and his face etched with emotion.

Beside him, Finance Minister II Datuk Jamaluddin Jarjis, his cheeks glistening with tears, was still trying to sing on. Deputy Finance Minister Datuk Dr Ng Yen Yen was dabbing her eyes with her pink *selendang* while secretary-general Datuk Shamsuddin Hitam tried to shield his feelings with a pamphlet.

That afternoon, Puteri Umno girls showed their appreciation for him in great style and spirit at the Umiten campus. One of them, a woman pilot in real life, parachuted from a helicopter while two others rappelled down a 15-m wall

while unfurling a giant pink banner that read: "Thank you, Sir!"

He must have been truly gratified that this young Malay women's wing, born in his closing years, had such verve and spunk.

"He looked so pleased. I think he knows he has been proven right about Puteri," said Suraya.

His final evening as Prime Minister was reserved for the Umno faithful at a breaking-of-fast gathering at the Dewan Merdeka in the PWTC. It had been a long, strenuous day but he looked relaxed and cool as he stood at the rostrum in a soft salmon pink *baju Melayu* and cream-coloured *capals*.

And despite the fact that in another 20 hours or so, he would arrive at the end his more than two decades as Prime Minister, his speech was not melancholy or sentimental. He stressed the need for Umno members to put party above self and to stay united.

At 6.58pm sharp, the congregation broke their fast after which the men adjourned for *maghrib* and *tarawih* prayers.

A little after 9pm, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi emerged from the prayer hall. The crowd lining the red carpet surged around him. There was an electric field in the air as people reached out to him, for by this time the next evening he would be the next Prime Minister of Malaysia.

A while later, Dr Mahathir appeared and there was a near stampede as the people swamped every step of his way back to the Dewan Merdeka. Just then, the lilting strains of *Pahlawan* came on and, quite amazingly, scores of people began singing along.

The song took the mood of the evening to a new level and there were damp faces as people held on to his hand, kissed it, asked for his autograph and begged to be photographed with him. He obliged every single request.

Indeed, his hands must have been sore from all the hand-shaking and his jaw must surely have ached from so much smiling.

The crowd would not leave them alone even after he and Dr Siti Hasmah sat down at their table.

Souvenir programmes, photographs of him, bits of paper and name tags (reporters were the chief culprits here) were placed before him. He signed everything without a murmur.

Dr Siti Hasmah sat patiently through it all, her plate of mango dessert untouched before her.

Eventually his minders cleared a path for them to leave, starting another mad scramble to line the red carpet.

"I feel indebted. He enabled such a smooth leadership transition," said Umno Youth exco member Datuk Subahan Kamal.

Even when they finally reached the car, the crowd continued to surround the couple seven to eight deep, while the photographers went into their final frenzy, their camera flashing non-stop. It was rock star treatment.

Finally, at about 10.10pm, the jet-black Proton Executive glided out from under the porch.

A group of Wanita Umno ladies called out to him: "We love yooooou!"

And as the car drove off into the deepening evening, the ladies wiped their eyes with their sleeves and *selendang*.