

Spray shock

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Man held over airport incident involving Dr M

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KOTA BARU: Police have arrested a man believed to have sprayed chemical from a canister in the direction of Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad moments after the former prime minister arrived at the Sultan Ismail Petra Airport in Pengkalan Chepa yesterday for a one-day visit.

The man, a Datuk, was arrested at 10.30pm, almost 12 hours after the incident, in Pasir Tumbuh.

Deputy Inspector-General of Police Tan Sri Musa Hassan confirmed the arrest.

"We believe the man can help us in

our investigations. I expect him to be produced in a magistrate's court in the morning," he told *The Star*.

Dr Mahathir, who was surrounded by hundreds of supporters, was standing inside a Pajero, with his upper body sticking out of the sunroof, and speaking to the crowd when the incident occurred at about 11am yesterday.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad condemned the incident, saying he was angry and regretted that it had occurred. He has ordered the police to investigate the incident and take stern action against the person or people responsible for the attack.

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A visibly distressed Dr Mahathir being whisked away by his bodyguard and aides to another vehicle after chemical was sprayed in his direction at the Sultan Ismail Petra Airport in Kelantan yesterday. — STARpic by SAZUKI EMBONG

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Dr Mahathir was met on arrival by two groups — one led by veteran politician Datuk Paduka Ibrahim Ali and the other by businessman Datuk Nik Sapeia Nik Yusoff.

Musa said that as Dr Mahathir was being ushered to a vehicle provided by Ibrahim, a scuffle broke out as supporters of Nik Sapeia wanted to be the ones to transport Dr Mahathir.

"During the scuffle a man was spotted taking out a canister and spraying what is believed to be an eye irritant on Ibrahim's face. The irritant also got into Dr Mahathir's face as well as a bodyguard's face," Musa said.

"Dr Mahathir was immediately protected and whisked away by his bodyguards into another car and driven to his hotel."

According to witnesses at the airport, the incident occurred just after

Dr Mahathir had been handed a loudhailer as his supporters wanted him to speak to them from the vehicle, as he had done on July 22 at Subang airport when he arrived home from a vacation.

The spray caused the former premier to suffer nausea and a stinging sensation in his eyes. He was also coughing. He was, however, not hospitalised and recovered in time to keep to his schedule.

It is learnt that the effects had abated by the time Dr Mahathir arrived at the hotel, where he had a brief rest.

Speaking to the media later, Dr Mahathir described the attack as an attempt to stop him from speaking out. He, however, did not make accusations against any particular party.

Talking about the spray that hit him, he said: "I felt my eyes stinging. I could not see clearly and had to

remove my glasses.

"This is not the Malaysian way. We are a non-violent people."

The former premier continued with his programme for the day, including attending a dialogue with veteran Umno leaders and a dinner organised by local non-governmental organisation, the Kelantan People's Action Council headed by Ibrahim.

In **Putrajaya**, Abdullah said: "I regret and am very angry that such an incident has happened."

He ordered the police to probe the incident and punish those responsible, and added that the matter should be immediately resolved to avoid any negative implication and misconception among the people.

The Prime Minister feared that certain quarters would take advantage of the incident by disseminating rumours, especially through the Internet.