

US mission expands Sabah cultural ties

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Cultural exchange at work: Malaysian Armed Forces and Pacific Partnership musicians performing together during the PP26 opening in Kota Kinabalu.

KOTA KINABALU: From military engineers and disaster-response teams to football stars and musicians, the United States has had a visible presence in Sabah's capital this week through programmes spanning humanitarian cooperation, sport, education and culture.

At the centre of the activity is Pacific Partnership 2026 (PP26), a multinational humanitarian assistance and disaster-preparedness mission involving Malaysia, the United States and seven other partner nations.

Running from Sept 2 to 15, PP26 has brought together 502 participants, comprising 187 Malaysian Armed Forces (ATM) personnel, 192 from the United States, 75 military personnel from Australia, Canada, Germany, Japan, South Korea, Singapore and the United Kingdom, as well as 48 NGO participants.

Joint Forces Commander Lt-Jen Datuk Seri Tengku Muhammad Fauzi Tengku Ibrahim said the mission was not a conventional military exercise but focused on humanitarian assistance, disaster preparedness and cooperation among countries and agencies.

He said disasters did not recognise borders, making such cooperation essential.

That spirit was on display at the opening ceremony at Intan Sabah on Thursday when members of the Pacific Partnership Band performed a Bahasa Malaysia song before joining the ATM Band on stage.

At SK Babagon Toki in Inanam, engineers from Malaysia, the United States, South Korea and Australia worked on a gazebo and observation deck, as well as improvements to school buildings and sports facilities.

PP26 mission commander Capt Robert Reyes said the project marked the culmination of 25 days of engineering work.

"Every young mind has the potential to move mountains, to change the world. They just need the opportunity and they need the inspiration."

Another project involves upgrading the outpatient waiting area at the Telipok health clinic, while other activities include health programmes, school engagements and public outreach.

A maritime search-and-rescue exercise is also scheduled for Sept 12 at ODEC Beach, Universiti Malaysia Sabah, simulating accidents involving a ferry and merchant vessel in Sepangar Bay.

The Pacific Partnership Fair will be held at Lintasan Deasoka the same day, featuring community health activities and a band performance.

Alongside PP26, the US Embassy has also been marking the 250th anniversary of American independence through Freedom 250 Sabah, a three-day programme held in Kota Kinabalu from Sept 1 to 3.

Among its highlights was a football clinic at Fut8 Arena in Sembulan, where up to 500 young Sabahans took part in football, mentorship and cultural exchange with US athletes.