

Hosokawa has final, fleeting moment among blossoms.By **Chaitanya Kalbag**

411 words

20 April 1994

Reuters News

English

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TOKYO, April 20 (Reuter) - "Blossoms in the air; unable to stay longer; and still escape time."

The haiku, or Japanese three-line verse, by the well-known poet Seishi Yamaguchi might have been written just for Japanese Prime Minister Morihiro Hosokawa as he strolled under the cherry blossoms on Wednesday in a landscaped Tokyo garden.

Hosokawa was hosting the annual blossom-viewing party on what is likely to be his last day as government leader after eight months in office.

How did that feel? "Ma-ma (so-so)," a smiling Hosokawa said as the rite of spring got under way in pale sunshine in the Shinjuku Gardens.

An official who asked not to be named said preparations for the party had been in suspense until the last minute.

Invitations had been printed before Hosokawa announced to a shocked nation on April 8 that he was quitting over a loan scandal. If a successor had been picked, it would have meant preparing thousands of new invitations.

Foreign military attaches in full dress uniform and diplomats in national regalia fell over each other as Hosokawa and his wife Kayoko, penned in by a few bodyguards, squeezed their way through the more than 7,000 guests in an unusual press-the-flesh melee.

Asked about his plans, the 56-year-old Hosokawa told reporters: "I'd like to take it easy for a while."

Beer and sake flowed freely and guests strolled around food-laden tables under trees ablaze with dozens of shades of pink, the ephemeral blossoms that in Japan symbolise spring.

Elsewhere in the city, Hosokawa's ruling coalition colleagues were near to choosing a successor.

But in the Shinjuku Gardens, with their 1,500 cherry trees of 34 varieties, the cares of office seemed far away for the aristocratic Hosokawa.

Despite the manner of his going, a weekend poll by the Daily Yomiuri newspaper showed 65 percent of respondents approved of Hosokawa's achievements during his time in office.

His ancestors made an art out of political survival. The original Hosokawa was a daimyo, a powerful territorial nobleman who in the early 17th century threw in his lot with the first of 15 Tokugawa shoguns and was granted a large fief in Kumamoto, on the southern island of Kyushu.

Hosokawa's maternal grandfather was Prince Fumimaro Konoe, prime minister in 1937-1939 and again in 1940-1941.

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