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All set to take on Mt Everest

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MIXED feelings - if we are honest with ourselves about Malaysia's mission to ascent Mount Everest in May, it would have to be described as such.

Why? Fear would be one obvious reason. Fear for the lives of our people as we recall the death of eight climbers (and many more before that) when a sudden storm swept the peak's fearsome "Death Zone" with snow, subzero cold and hurricane-force winds on May 10 last year.

If highly-respected mountaineers like Scott Fischer, a veteran Everest guide from the US, and Rob Hall from New Zealand could perish in that fateful storm, it would seem harder for the Malaysian team to handle a mountain as temperamental and tempestuous as Everest.

Even expedition leader Noor Ramli Sulaiman seems to understand and acknowledge the fears of many.

When I spoke to him at the Everest operations centre in Jalan Ampang, Kuala Lumpur on New Year's eve, he sounded reassuring.

He said the team had trained rigorously for three years but he was aware that there were people out there "supporting us and there are those having serious doubts about the whole thing".

The doubts may have something to do with the misconception held by many that high-altitude mountaineering can only be achieved by Caucasians who are bigger and presumably better built than Asians.

Noor Ramli said this wasn't true because his experience has shown that Asian climbers, most of them smaller than the regular Caucasian climber, can do just as well in extreme mountaineering conditions.

He has great confidence in the Malaysian team. "We planned this 10 years ago, but we didn't have qualified local climbers then so we needed time to train them."

He said after conquering Mount Annapura IV late last year, the group team was in good spirits. "Their success there has boosted the team's confidence. They are aware of the risks involved but with the blessings and support from family members and friends, I believe we will make it to the top," he said.

Noor Ramli and his men have undergone intensive training and conditioning climbs in Alpine conditions. Preliminary selection was carried out in 1993 with tremendous response from enthusiastic climbers around the country.

Twenty-five climbers were selected for the expedition line-up. Then, further tests were held on Mount Kinabalu to select those with more stamina for the summit team.

The names of a 10-man summit team were announced by Sports and Youth Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yasin late last year.

They are N. Mohandas, 36, R. Ramakrishnan, 32, Aimy Zairin Mohamed, 25, Borhan Ibrahim, 35, Mohd Fauzan Hassan, 30, Kapten Mohd Rizan Mat Hassan, 35, Zahidi Paiman, 31, M. Moorthy, 28, M. Magendran, 34, and Choong Kin Wah, 40.

They were selected for their excellence in discipline, climbing skills, physical and mental endurance, team spirit and leadership qualities.

Among them is 25-year-old graduate Aimy, the youngest in the team. Choong is the oldest. Commenting on the deaths of the eight climbers during last May's freak storm, Noor Ramli said he was not discouraged by the event as death was part and parcel of a climber's life.

"The commercial guides who were killed up there had broken all basic

rules in mountaineering when they put their clients on the peak. They paid with their lives for the mistakes they made," he said.

"I will not push our team to the limit on summit day as we are taking this task with safety as the highest priority in mind.

"If the weather is not conducive, I will wait for as long as our climbing permit allows us to, and will only go for the summit on a good day."

The climb, which has a RM4 million budget, has a supportive patron in Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad. It was his Kemuncak Dunia (Peak of the World) vision to put a team of Malaysians on top of the world's highest summit.

Technical expertise from the mountaineering associations of India and Nepal was sought to help the Malaysian climbers during training sessions.

Climbing permits were booked from the Nepalese Government as early as 1986 but the project was given a boost when the Sports and Youth Ministry endorsed a fee of US\$120,000 (RM300,000) for the permit.

A further RM400,000 will be billed to the Malaysian team by the Nepalese trekking agency acting as the official guide for our mountaineers in the expedition.

The cost incurred by the agency includes food and lodging at the base camp, Sherpa guides and liaison officer, equipment for hire and helicopter rescue from the base camp.

Pre-summit food specially ordered for the summit team is estimated to cost RM80,000. This covers a specially formulated diet for high-altitude mountaineering.

The climbers will have to rely on lightweight food bars and special liquid supplements once they are travelling beyond the base camp. The specially formulated nourishment is vital to their survival.

Specially made group equipment like tents, ropes, cooking gear and climbing accessories is estimated to cost RM300,000. Individual gear for climbers like clothing and backpacks is estimated at RM15,000 per person.

Protective clothing like wind-proof jackets are custom-made to ensure a good fit. The climbers are expected to wear at least five layers of clothing to protect themselves from the cold.

Personal accident insurance is also a requirement. A premium of RM500,000 for a sum of RM14 million insurance for the expedition. This is to assure the summit team that their lives are placed in high priority without compromise.

If all goes well, after Everest, another team will set out to explore the last frontiers of the Earth. They will have a shot at roughing it out in the cold in a trek across Antarctica.

The idea was suggested by the Prime Minister in 1994 when he launched the Rakan Muda programme. Excess funds from the fund-raising collection of the Everest expedition will be used to finance the Antarctica trek.

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