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Everest-Deadline

DEADLINE ORDER CLAIM BASELESS, SAYS M'SIAN EVEREST TEAM LEADER

By: Azman Ujang

KUALA LUMPUR, May 14 (Bernama) -- The Malaysian expedition on Mount Everest is not under order to reach the summit by May 20 or any other deadline, its leader Nor Ramlee Sulaiman said today.

Speaking in a telephone interview with Bernama from the base camp of the world's highest mountain, he said the claim by the leader of the New Zealand expedition Guy Cotter that the Malaysian climbers were under such an order from Kuala Lumpur was totally baseless.

He said the final decision regarding the assault on the summit was his alone as expedition leader to make after taking all factors, especially the weather, into account.

" We are the people who know the conditions best and to say that the Malaysian team is under order from Kuala Lumpur to reach the summit by May 20 or any other date is not only baseless but a big lie," he said.

Nor Ramlee, a Klang Port Authority officer, said the team heard Cotter made the claim in a radio interview with the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) while they were having dinner on Monday.

The interview was reported by Associated Press (AP) yesterday which quoted Cotter as saying that Malaysia has endangered its climbers by ordering them to reach the summit by May 20.

"There has been a lot of manipulation from Kuala Lumpur. The leader here is being reprimanded for bringing his climbers down to base camp off the mountain. There is concern for (these) climbers who have very little experience and make up an expedition which is a flag-waving exercise," Cotter said.

Cotter's claim was also denied yesterday by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who said the government had not put pressure on the climbers but only wanted them to make it to the peak safely.

Nor Ramlee said a member of the Malaysian team confronted Cotter the next day about his remarks but the New Zealander was "very evasive".

He disclosed that Cotter, who is a consultant with a New Zealand company which supplies mountain-climbing logistics, was more a businessman than a climber and had made the remarks because the Malaysian expedition had earlier rejected his offer to be the suppliers.

"He had offered his company's services at US\$55,000 (RM137,500) per climber and with 12 climbers it would have cost US\$660,000 (RM1.65 million) in all. So he must have been disappointed at not getting any business from us and this must have prompted him to attack us this way," Nor Ramlee said.

Instead the Malaysian expedition engaged the Anna Purna Tracking and Mountaineering Pte Ltd of Nepal which, among other things, provided 15 veteran Sherpas, some of whom have reached the summit twice even without oxygen previously.

Nor Ramlee said the Malaysian team had called off their first summit assault on May 9 due to strong winds of over 100 kilometres per hour despite forecast of good weather by the India's Meteorological Department.

Only four climbers are in the summit assault expedition. They are Mohd Fauzan Hassan, N. Mohandas, M. Magendran and Gary Choong Kin Wah who will carry the challenge of planting the Malaysian flag for the first time ever on the world's highest peak.

Winds of over 100km per hour are expected to lash Mount Everest until May 20, according to the latest weather forecast from the Department in New Delhi which was received through the Indian Satellite.

Nor Ramlee said the next plan of the climbers would be to make their second assault to the summit on the midnight of May 20.

" Insyallah (God willing) we are due to reach the summit. If the winds are still above 100km per hour, then we will postpone the summit assault the next day or until May 24 which is the last day for such an attempt to be possible. After this, the monsoon season will set in and in any case, no climbing is permitted after June 1.

" This means that if we cannot make it by May 24, then we will have to pull out," he said.

Nor Ramlee said despite these heavy odds and the "attack" by the New Zealand expedition leader, the morale of the climbers remained very high to make it to the summit.

" As for Guy Cotter, we know how to deal with him later but let us reach the summit first. Cotter came along with a big team from New Zealand but now only two members are still with him while the rest have pulled out and this speaks a lot about his credibility," he added. -- BERNAMA

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