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Everest team returns to a heroes' welcome

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PETALING JAYA, Tues. - The Everest '97 team that entered the annals of Malaysian achievements by scaling the highest peak in the world made a simple enough descent to reality today - they touched down at the Sultan Abdul Aziz Shah Airport in an Airbus.

But well before that, at 2.10pm on May 23 (11.55am Nepal time), as M. Magendran planted the Malaysian flag atop the 8,848-metre snow-capped peak, joined by N. Mohandas 15 minutes later, they touched the lives of millions of Malaysians who found renewed strength and belief in the catchphrase Malaysia Boleh.

(Mount Everest is about 20 times higher than the Petronas Twin Towers which at 450m is the world's tallest building.)

Never mind if 600-odd climbers had repeated the achievement since Sir Edmund Hillary and his Sherpa guide, Tensing Norgay, first conquered the peak in 1953.

The fact remains that the team of 23 climbers had braved the rugged terrain and hostile conditions to win fame and honour for the country.

It certainly was a magic moment for the more than 5,000 people who turned up at the Sultan Abdul Aziz Shah Airport, from as early as three in the morning, to accord the team a heroes' welcome.

Malaysians from all walks of life came together to show their support and share in the victory.

There was a silat group in traditional Malay costume, a dragon dance troupe, kalari payat exponents and a Bhangra team.

And there were schoolchildren totally caught up in the swelling wave of emotions.

Most of all, the euphoria was in the shared knowledge that Malaysia is able to hold its own with the best on the roof of the world.

No amount of live television coverage can tell what it is like to be on a merciless mountain with temperature as low as minus 40 degrees Celsius and the wind blowing at 90km an hour.

It was "a moment of joy and glory" for Magendran when he reached the summit of Mount Everest although he and team-mate Mohandas were the only two of the four in the last leg who made it to the top.

"The view on the mountain was beautiful - I could see Nepal on one side and Tibet on the other," said a jubilant Magendran who said he was overwhelmed by the warm welcome at the airport.

"You can only claim victory when you make it down to the base camp. Otherwise, I would not be here to tell my story," Magendran added, saying that climbing the mountain was only half the task and getting down was just as dangerous.

When asked what was it that pushed him on, he said: "The thought that Prime Minister (Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad), the Youth and Sports Minister (Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin) and the whole nation were watching me and wanted me to complete the mission."

Magendran said he almost did not make it to the top as his Sherpa guide had accidentally turned off his oxygen supply.

"We had just reached the South Col and I had already finished one bottle of oxygen. I changed the bottle and asked the Sherpa accompanying me to turn it on but he accidentally turned it off.

"Suddenly, I felt like I had lost all my energy and was about to faint. I called out to Mohandas and asked him to check my oxygen supply and he

told me that it had been turned off."

Magendran, 33, an English teacher at Sekolah Kebangsaan Teluk Gadong Klang, said he and Mohandas were lucky that the weather was fine and they were able to make it down safely.

Mohandas, 36, a father of three and an administrative assistant with Shell Trading Sdn Bhd, said he was confident all the way up as the team had made all the preparations for the assault.

Things, however, were not so rosy for two other climbers in the final assault - Mohd Fauzan Hassan, 39, and Gary Choong, 29, who had to turn back when they were so close to the summit.

Mohd Fauzan had to turn back because he was stricken with diarrhoea while Choong suffered frostbites.

Mohd Fauzan, who reached a height of 8,400 metres, a mere 448 metres short of the summit, said he cried when he made the decision to turn back.

"I got the diarrhoea at Camp Two from the drinking water. Probably it was not boiled. However, I got better and decided to push on."

Mohd Fauzan said the diarrhoea however struck again about three hours after he left Camp Four and he quit when he almost fainted from exhaustion.

Choong was also forced to make the difficult decision to turn back a little while later, leaving Magendran and Mohandas to complete the assault.

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