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LEAD Malaysia-Everest

M'SIAN CLIMBERS CONQUER MOUNT EVEREST

KUALA LUMPUR, May 23 (Bernama) -- Two Malaysian climbers today reached the top of Mount Everest in the climax of a two-month and first ever assault on the world's highest peak by a Malaysian expedition.

Defying the odds, 33-year-old school teacher from Klang, M.Magendran set foot on the summit to plant the Malaysian flag atop the 8,848m snow capped peak at 2.10 pm Malaysian time (11.55 am Nepal time).

He was joined there 15 minutes later by N.Mohandas, a father of three who works as an administrative assistant with Shell Trading Sdn Bhd.

"I have made it" -- these were the first words uttered by a jubilant Magendran when he contacted team leader Mej Rizan Mat Hassan who was anxiously waiting at Camp Two located at 6,492m.

News of the achievement was relayed at 2.15 pm (Malaysian time) to the rest of the team at the Everest Base Camp (5,400m) where RTM crew Aminuddin Abu Samah kept millions of Malaysians at home updated throughout a six-hour "live" telecast.

Magendran and Mohandas, who were accompanied by five Sherpa guides, stayed on the peak for about 40 minutes against strong winds.

Among the first to congratulate the team was Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who is currently in London, and Acting Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim.

The perilous success of the Malaysian pair came a week before Nepali authorities close the climbing season due to the advent of the monsoon at the end of May or early June.

Two Canadians were reported to have also made the peak today. Seven climbers of various nationalities lost their lives while on the same mission last week.

Magendran and Mohandas were part of a final four-member team which had begun their ascent to the summit at 11 pm (Nepal time) yesterday from South Col, otherwise known as Camp Four located at altitude 8,000m.

But two members of the team, Mohd Fauzan Hassan and Gary Choong, withdrew. Mohd Fauzan, 39, was advised by their Sherpa guides to drop out four hours later when he had a stomach upset.

Two hours later, an exhausted Choong, 29, was also assisted down to South Col by two Sherpas, according to the Project Malaysia-Everest '97 secretariat here.

Magendran and Mohandas are reported to be making their way down to the same camp where they will rest overnight before continuing their descent.

The final 800-metre ascent to the peak from Camp 4 took 12 hours and required the two climbers to pass through a treacherous slope named the "Hillary Step" after the first man to reach the Everest summit, New Zealander Sir Edmund Hillary.

On their descent Magendran and Mohandas would be joined by Mohd Fauzan and Choong who were resting at Camp 4.

They would later be joined by three other climbers in the support group -- Mej Mohd Rizan Mat Hassan, S. Moorthy, and Borhan Ibrahim -- who were now at Camp 2 (6,492m).

Two female climbers among the 10 of the earlier ascent group -- Teoh Lee Lee and Aimy Zairin Mohamed -- had to abort their attempt because they were taken ill with acute mountain sickness and sore throats.

All of them are part of the 20-member first-ever Malaysian Everest expedition led by Nor Ramllee Sulaiman.

The assault of the peak, originally planned for May 9, was put off because strong wind of up to 120 km per hour velocity at Camp 4, forced the Malaysians as well as climbers from other nations to descend to the base camp.

Much national pride was attached to the Malaysian expedition or the Malaysia-Everest '97 project, a national undertaking mooted by Dr Mahathir himself and launched by him on June 4 last year.

Dr Mahathir presented the Malaysian flag to expedition members last Feb 28 on the eve of their departure for Nepal.

The Malaysian climbers reached the Everest base camp on March 26 and 10 of them began undergoing six weeks of acclimatisation from April 1.

Five among them, including Aimy Zairin, were selected for the final ascent team while the rest formed the support group. -- BERNAMA

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