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Sabbaruddin woos Aussie tourists

Ossie Raj

TOURISM Minister Datuk Sabbaruddin Chik, who made flying visits to Melbourne and Auckland last week must be delighted with the receptions he received at both cities.

Accompanied by Tourism Malaysia's director general Datuk Dr Arshad Hashim and Tourism Malaysia Board member Zainuddin bin Mohd Zain, the energetic Minister did the rounds of radio interviews, media conferences and met Australian travel and tourism leaders almost immediately alighting from his aircraft.

His message was simple: visit Malaysia and you will love it and you will want to visit us again.

But it was no easy sailing for Sabbaruddin. He was met with a barrage of questions from the media in Australia and New Zealand on a host of controversial subjects, chiefly the haze problem in the region and its effect on the 1998 Commonwealth Games in Kuala Lumpur and Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's alleged attack on the Jews over South-East Asia's currency and economic turmoil.

Sabbarudin handled the questions with the deft touch of the able and experienced politician that he is and in the process, convinced Australians that the haze, although very serious at certain times, should clear well before next September and that Dr Mahathir had no intention of hurting or blaming the Jews in general, pointing out that Dr Henry Kissinger and Dr Mahathir were good firends.

The Minister freely admitted that there was grave concern in the region about the haze emanating from Sumatra and Kalimantan. He agreed with Australian journalists that the Commonwealth Games was under threat with the possibility of overseas athletes refusing to go to Malaysia to take part in the Games. It was a situation no host country wanted to be in.

Although Sabbaruddin was coy about revealing what direct measures the Malaysian Government was taking to confront the Indonesians about the forest burnout, he pointed out that half of Malaysia's firefighting force of 4,000 were helping the Indonesians to bring the blaze under control.

There is no doubting the anxiety among sportsmen and women in all Commonwealth countries of the risk involved in competing in Malaysia under such unhealthy conditions.

Sabaruddin told the well-attended media conferences in Melbourne and Auckland that although the haze was hampering Malaysia's preparation for the Games, the Government was confident all works will be completed on schedule. But he could give no guarantee that there would be no haze come next September.

He lamented the fact that while Victoria, Canada, the host of the 1984 Commonwealth Games did not have to spend money on many new constructions and sporting venues, Malaysia had to start virtually from scratch. "We had to build new stadiums, a new swimming pool and several new venues. Everything had to be new, otherwise Malaysia would not have been given the 1998 Games. I don't know how Victoria got away with it," he said.

Sabbaruddin said it was costing Malaysia more than RM2 billion to stage the Games. "It's a lot of money for about 11 to 12 days of sporting events," he said.

However, the show must go on and barring the threat of a possible haze, everything, including the vexing transport system, will be in readiness for a spectacular gathering of some of the world's best athletes and

teams.

The Minister took the opportunity to assure Australian and New Zealand travel industry leaders, tour operators and sporting organisations that there would be adequate accommodation to cater for the estimated 80,000 overseas visitors to the Games. In all about 16,000 hotel rooms will be available.

Throughout his hectic four-day visit, Sabbaruddin painted the "big picture" of Tourism Malaysia. He did his best to convey the message that the Games was a vehicle to dramatically display Malaysia's tourism potential and place the country on the global tourist map.

Many in Australia are puzzled as to why Malaysia has been lagging in promoting the Commonwealth Games and taking advantage of a situation to extract maximum publicity for the Games and the country.

One cynic said recently that had it not been for the haze and its potential threat to athletes' performances, there would have been very little to remind overseas people that Malaysia was hosting the Games.

Sydney, which is staging the 2000 Olympic Games, has a well-oiled publicity machine that churns out first-class promotional material for overseas mailing from its Games headquarters in Homebush Bay on the out outskirts of Sydney.

This is already paying dividends with a recent survey showing that Sydney is enjoying a huge boost as a tourist destination. Australia is expecting a surge in overseas visitors not only during the Olympic Games, but also before and after the Big Event.

Tourism Malaysia officials in Australia, headed by its director Amiruddin bin Abu and his hard-working staff, were encouraged by the Minister's visit Down Under. The visit provided an on-the-spot study of the Australian tourism market and boosted their confidence.

Sabbaruddin was obviously impressed and had, on many occasions, emphasised that Australia and New Zealand were important markets and more money and effort would be committed to promote Malaysia in these countries. There is a possibility that Melbourne and Auckland would become new focus centres for Tourism Malaysia.

The Malaysian Food and Cultural Festivals held in Melbourne and Auckland to coincide with the Minister's visits were outstanding successes. The food prepared by chefs flown in from Kuala Lumpur won the hearts of Australians, who openly said that there was nothing to beat Malaysian cuisine.

The Ministry of Culture's 25-member dance troupe gave spectacular and stunning performances. The Malaysian High Commissioner to Australia, Datuk Adnan Othman was so impressed by the troupe's performance in Melbourne that he expressed a desire to see the group tour the main cities of Australia to display Malaysia's rich culture and diversity.

After seeing the spontaneous and overwhelming responses from the public in Melbourne and Auckland and the good work of Tourism Malaysia officials in Australia, it should not be a surprise if the good Minister and the good doctor (Arshad Hashim) send the troupe back to Australia in the near future.

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