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The `best ever Games' it must be

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WITH this week's "comedy" surrounding Sukom having been quickly put to an end, it is hoped that all the parties involved in organising next year's Commonwealth Games will now get down and make it "the best Commonwealth Games of this century" as promised by Sukom Ninety Eight Bhd executive chairman Jen (B) Tan Sri Hashim Mohamed Ali.

We should thank our good fortune that the "comedy" did not continue as it could turn into a tragedy that would make us the laughing-stock of the sporting world.

The swift and effective intervention by acting Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim must be fully recognised, although I wonder about the nature of the "humble appeal" he made to Hashim as to make the latter change his mind about resigning. But I will be the last person to underestimate Anwar's charm.

With so much emotional outpouring as reflected in the statements by Hashim (examples: "I don't have the political clout to deal with the secretary-general of Umno" and "Why is it when the Prime Minister, who is chairman of the Games council, is out of the country that all these happen?") during the short-lived controversy, the danger of the incident escalating into something worse could not be dismissed.

The extraordinary event, which unfolded on Monday with Hashim's tearful announcement that he was tendering his resignation as Sukom executive chairman following a spate of ministerial criticisms on the lack of promotion and publicity for the Games, could have turned into a tragedy for our image as a mature and fair-minded people.

But Anwar's intervention and the happy ending saved the day.

Youth and Sports Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin had last week said Sukom should step up the publicity campaign for the Games. The report was front-paged by the New Straits Times. This was followed by the publication of Hashim's response.

Two days after Muhyiddin's statement, Culture, Arts and Tourism Minister Datuk Sabbaruddin Chik took Sukom to task for the same reason. His statement was front-paged by the Utusan Malaysia newspaper. Sabbaruddin had also questioned the high salaries of Sukom staff, their perks and the first class air travel enjoyed by its top executives.

I think the drastic action that followed should not have taken place. It was not an unfair exchange. The newspapers involved had given fair hearing to all parties involved. This must be recognised if we believe that the Press has a role to play in the Games.

On the day that Hashim announced his resignation, the NST devoted nearly one-third of a page to publishing in full Sukom's response to the various criticisms levelled against it. Hence, it came as a great surprise to me that the week's events should have occurred at all.

HERE, I would like to commend Sabbaruddin for boldly sticking to his criticism of Sukom but openly apologising to Hashim for the problems he caused.

Saying he was sorry and sad that Hashim had taken such a drastic step, he defended his comments. He said they were not meant to offend anyone, especially Hashim, whom he described as a friend.

"I apologise to Tan Sri Hashim if my words caused him problems," Sabbaruddin said.

It was a brave gesture on his part. More often than not, a person of his position would have opted for an easier way out of such a tricky situation by shifting the blame to the media. Very often, the Press is accused of misreporting or even lying.

"Terima kasih sahabat!" (Thank you, friend).

Now that the Cabinet has directed Muhyiddin to play a leading role in ensuring the smooth organisation of the Games, Sukom and other parties involved in the event should feel more at ease.

With the Government having used its influence to get the edge in the race to host the Games and spending a huge sum of money to build facilities directly and indirectly related to the event, it is only fair that it should have more control over its preparations.

Speaking to reporters after Wednesday's Cabinet meeting, Muhyiddin said from now on, Hashim as well as the Games' 12 management committees, would report directly to him.

Prior to this, the committees reported to the Games management committee co-chaired by Hashim and Olympic Council of Malaysia president Tan Sri Hamzah Abu Samah.

The change in the lines of authority will give Muhyiddin more power to make decisions. The ministry previously did not have full access to information and decisions made by the Sukom management committee.

We should not lose sight of the fact that the success or failure of the Games will be judged less by how much money the organisers make or did not make, but by how well the event is put together, by the performance of the national contingent and by the kind of image it creates for the country.

Even taxi drivers, hotel porters and street sweepers have a role to play in making it "the best ever (Commonwealth) Games this century" as promised by Hashim when he withdrew his resignation letter on Wednesday.

KOTA Kinabalu is a boom town. The last few years have seen the transformation of the Sabah State capital into a bustling "city". Other Sabah towns are also experiencing a boom.

But as Anwar said in Sandakan last Sunday, many people in the State are still poor. Statistically, Sabah has one of the largest number of poor households in the country despite being rich in land and natural resources.

Apart from the difficulty in distributing development evenly due to the size of the State, widespread poverty among the Sabah people could also be attributed to rampant corruption, abuse of power and mismanagement by its successive governments.

Hence, Anwar's warning to State leaders that Kuala Lumpur is determined to change the "old culture" of Sabah politics, even at the risk of facing defection by some of them, is not to be taken lightly.

He said the Federal Government was prepared to face this risk in its determination to combat graft, administrative irregularities and abuse of power among the State's leaders.

Sources said Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who is responsible for taking Umno to Sabah, had told his deputy to give an unmistakable warning to Sabah's leaders, in particular those from Umno, that the monkey business must stop.

Speaking to the Press after chairing the Sabah Umno Liaison Committee, Anwar said the Federal Government was giving a clear warning to State leaders not to assume that because they were immensely popular, they could threaten the Government if action was taken against them.

In fact, said Anwar, the Government was confident of mustering enough popular support for its action against State leaders who were corrupt and had abused their positions.

But Anwar, more than anybody else, should be aware that public opinion is easier shaped than maintained. Already we are hearing people questioning the seriousness of the current anti-corruption drive.

We cannot blame them for harbouring such doubts as many highly publicised cases of investigation into corrupt practices have suddenly died down or simply faded into oblivion.

THE new Selangor Menteri Besar, Datuk Abu Hassan Omar, made three very important statements this week. First, he expressed confidence that there would not be any squatter colonies left in the State by the year 2000.

Secondly, he vowed to lower the poverty level to below one per cent and thirdly, not to degazette any more State forest.

Speaking to reporters after a briefing by State Secretary Datuk Hashim Meon in Shah Alam on Monday, Abu Hassan said with proper planning and co-ordination by all parties, the twin targets of eliminating squatters and reducing poverty could be achieved before the year 2000.

One could not agree more with the Menteri Besar when he stressed the need to step up enforcement against squatters.

It is a widely known fact that as one squatter family is resettled temporarily in a longhouse or permanently in a low-cost housing scheme, another squatter family will move in unless the hut is destroyed.

Even so, there is no guarantee that another squatter will not move in to build a new hut. With the State being swamped by foreign workers, legal and illegal, the pressure on housing continues. It is not uncommon to see a squatter hut once occupied by a local family is now occupied by several immigrant families.

I agree wholeheartedly with Abu Hassan that low-cost housing projects must also be closely monitored to ensure that there are enough houses for the low-income group and that these houses are allocated to eligible buyers.

On Wednesday, Abu Hassan said Selangor would not allow any more permanent forests to be developed, adding that the State Government would also step up efforts to identify and gazette new areas as forest reserves to replace those which had been opened up.

Abu Hassan was concerned that large tracts of permanent forest reserves had been degazetted for various reasons in the last six years. A total of 22,210ha were de-gazetted between 1991 and March this year.

I am sure Abu Hassan's pledges will be closely monitored by the public and his bosses in Kuala Lumpur since he is supposed to have a good understanding of the stand of the Federal Government on these matters, having vacated his Cabinet post only recently. We have heard others making similar pledges before.

NOW that the Cabinet has made a decision urging State Governments to consider lifting the ban on the concert by the local group KRU, I hope they will use their power wisely and judiciously so that we can put to an end this absurdity.

As I have stated in last week's column, State Governments should have a set of rules regarding "yes" and "no" and "dos and don'ts" for entertainment events.

I wonder what is so terribly wrong about the proposed concert except that it has the word "mania" at the end of it (as in KRUmania) and that it is sponsored by a cigarette company (Peter Stuyvesant).

If State Governments do not like the title of the show and its sponsorship by a cigarette company, they should be able to come up with suggestions to make the show acceptable to them.

I congratulate the Perlis Menteri Besar, Datuk Seri Shahidan Kassim, for

coming up with conditions for KRU to perform in his State. He wants the organisers to donate part of the proceeds to a State youth programme.

It does not do our image any good when on the one hand, we allow all shades and forms of foreign entertainers, including Michael Jackson, to perform in our country but ban our own young performers.

Also, it is not wise to expect such an issue to be taken up and solved by the Cabinet. While it is heartening to see the Cabinet showing concern for all the things that are happening in the country, I think a matter of this nature is better left in the care of local authorities. Not even Menteri Besar should get involved. If we do not like the idea of our young people being affected by mania - defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as violent madness or extreme enthusiasm for something - we should also not be affected by the haram (banning) mania.

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