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A jump into history

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NORTH Pole? Jumping in the freezing wind? Are you nuts? What are you trying to prove? "Almost everyone asks me this," says Lieutenant (retired) Aziz Ahmad, who will lead 15 national skydivers when they attempt to freefall over the North Pole in the next few weeks.

Someone even wrote to the newspaper condemning the exercise. An annoyed reader from Malacca claimed that the expedition is frivolous.

Aziz did expect some reservations from the public in view of the present economic situation.

"This radical idea came under heavy fire from quarters who think it a pure waste of time and money. To us, though, this event is not a race or publicity stunt but one to promote skydiving and exploration of places we have not been to.

"Malaysians have heard of the North Pole but I don't think anyone has been there to see one of God's most magnificent creations. This opportunity to land at the polar cap gives us a chance to learn and witness life in Arctic conditions.

"This is valuable knowledge! which we can utilise in future exploration projects in anticipation of the national expedition to Antarctica. Our experience of the extreme cold will provide answers to the next batch of explorers.

"Well, I'm glad that there are people who believe in the mission, I especially our patron Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, and our behind us all the way," says Aziz.

"The best thing I can think of so far is that no Government funds were solicited to finance our trip."

The jump leader, with more than 1,930 jumps to his credit, maintains that the North Pole expedition is timely and would benefit most of its members as it is strictly an educational journey.

Leading the expedition is former Armed Forces commando Abdul Rahim Dahalan who is also known as "The Flying - Grandfather". At 51, he is the oldest amongst the skydivers.

The team, according to Abdul Rahim, is made up of serving as well as excommandos still active in skydiving, and three civilians including a woman.

"I am very confident with this team because they have trained very hard for the mission. This is not an ego thing we are not going out there in the cold for personal glory.

"Everyone will put in his best the day we jump into history, in the true spirit of Malaysia Boleh!," he asserts.

Abdul Rahim believes in what he does and this critical factor earned him the role of expedition leader and respect among his team mates. "The Government is backing us all the way. We are very thankful for the assistance provided during our reconnaissance trip to Russia.

"It allowed us to establish contacts to carry out the jump. I have to thank Foreign Minister Datuk Abdullah Ahmad Badawi for his commitment to the project. He provided us with the diplomatic contacts in Russia to initiate this effort," says Abdul Rahim.

Sole woman team member Nordziah Mohd Noor, 39, stands tall among her peers. On the day she jumps solo from the Russian built IL-76 aircraft over the North Pole, this woman will be the unquestionable pride of our nation.

A mother of five, Nordziah has years of experience in the great

outdoors. Being selected for the team as an administrative officer prompted her to take up skydiving. In a short period, she has performed six successful static freefall jumps.

"I do get very nervous up there during training sessions. Getting on the aircraft and jumping out is a real big thing to me. But my team mates have been very encouraging and helped me to learn and keep up with the pace.

"My children are very proud of me when they see me at practice sessions. I have their blessings and this has boosted my confidence," she says.

The team, which leaves Kuala Lumpur on April 3, will head for Moscow where they will train and undergo acclimatisation at Wolosow. There, team building intensifies with practice jumps in cold conditions.

From Wolosowo, the skydivers will head for the town of Kathanga in Siberia where temperatures will get extreme at -30 degrees Celsius and below. This will be the final stage before everyone ships out to an ice-airbase near the North Pole.

There, final checks will be made before our skydivers are flown over a designated drop zone at the North Pole. They will be ,joined by an international team from the United States, Russia and Europe during the freefall attempt.

The Russian ice-base will be one "global village" where more than 100 individuals will gather while awaiting transit to the North Pole.

Once out of the aircraft at 3,500m above sea level, the true test of skill and survivability will begin with chilly winds over 175kmh and temperatures below -70 Celsius.

Descending at a speed of 256kmh, the team will only have some 60 seconds to react under extreme cold and windy conditions before touching down.

On the icy caps of the Arctic terrain, the skydivers will wait for extraction by helicopter before they are ferried back to Siberia. The transit will take somewhere between three and eight hours.

While waiting for history to be created, we fellow Malaysians can only wish these courageous people the best of luck.

Malaysia Boleh!

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