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A new challenge for Malaysia

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FIRST it was Mount Everest. Then came North Pole free fall expedition.

Now a group of Malaysians, encouraged by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's words, are training to compete in the 1998 World Endurance Horse Riding Championships in Dubai on Dec 12.

Bukit Kiara Resort executive director Dato Kamaruddin Abdul Ghani, who is co-ordinating the preparations, said it will be the first time Malaysians will compete in the race.

"It will be over 160km and is to be completed in 24 hours," said Kamaruddin.

"Both the riders and horses are undergoing comprehensive training."

Kamaruddin said UAE will pay for the trip but all training expenses will be borne by the individual riders.

Among the riders are former deputy Health Minister Datuk Farid Ariffin, Malaysian Equestrian Association secretary Syed Abu Bakar Syed Almohdzar, Omar Abdullah, Rosli Dahlan, Zuraimi Nawawi and Kamaruddin himself.

However, the squad has not been finalised and the riders will have to compete in the trials to be held on Aug 12 at Universiti Pertanian Malaysia.

Kamaruddin said Police are also fielding a team and they too have started their preparations.

Equestrian, a relatively new sport in Malaysia, has several components such as dressage and show jumping but endurance racing has never been staged in Asia.

It is held in extreme topographical and climatic conditions and considered an ultimate test of courage, stamina, skill and intelligence.

Farid describes the endurance race as a test of "mind over matter".

"You can have a strong body but you must have the mental strength to keep going too. Like the marathon where sometimes the legs say give up but the mind says no."

Unlike show jumping and dressage where points are awarded by a panel of judges, in endurance race the power of judging is with the veterinarian.

"We are the judge and jury," said veterinary surgeon Dr S.P. Balakrishna Naidu, who supervises the training.

"Only we can disqualify a rider. And it only happens when the horse fails veterinary inspection tests."

Dr Balakrishna is the only Malaysian to attend an endurance vetting course and he officiated at the 33rd Tom Quilty Gold Cup, a 160km endurance race held on June 5-8 in Mount Pleasant, Adelaide.

Dr Balakrishna said not only must the rider and horse be fit, the same is also required of veterinarians, strappers, stewards and helpers.

"It is tough life for them too. They must stay awake and remain alert throughout the race. In Adelaide the race started at midnight and finished 24 hours later. The weather can take its toll on everyone too. Dehydration is the biggest threat."

It will be winter in Dubai when the competition begins.

Kamaruddin said as a result the training is done as early as six in the morning and in the late evening too.

"Sometimes, passing through a rough hilly terrain over miles of pebbles, stones and wetlands can be a real test.

"The most vital element is the horse. There should be no abuse. Any sign of torture or abuse, the rider is failed. The horse must meet the heart

requirement of 64bpm (beats per minute) at every interval or lap, as they say, which covers 30 kilometres."

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