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Games-Closing

BEST EVER COMMONWEALTH GAMES COMES TO A CLOSE (pix)

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KUALA LUMPUR, Sept 21 (Bernama) -- Queen Elizabeth tonight closed the last Commonwealth Games of this century, hailed as the biggest and best ever in the Games' history, in another spectacular and glittering ceremony at the Olympic-class National Stadium in Bukit Jalil here.

The 16th Commonwealth Games, held for the first time in Asia, was a first for Malaysia and the biggest sporting event that it has ever hosted.

It was attended by 5,000 athletes and officials from 70 countries with a record number of 16 sports including the debut of team events.

The excellent infrastructural facilities of the various sports venues also drew praise from various quarters.

Australia, the 2000 Olympics host, again emerged from the 11-day competition as the overall champions with 80 gold medals. The Australians also set a world record through their men's 4x200m freestyle swimming quartet and came close to several more world-breaking efforts.

England with 36 gold medals was next followed by Canada (30) and Malaysia (10).

Riding on staunch and fervent crowd support and the spirited slogan of "Malaysia Boleh" (Malaysia Can), the homesters achieved their best ever result since taking part in the Games in 1950.

As a tribute to the nation and the people for the Games success and in recognition and appreciation of the Malaysian contingent's outstanding performance, the government declared Sept 28 as a public holiday.

"Malaysia promised us the best Games ever and they have delivered that promise," Commonwealth Games Federation chairman Michael Fennell said during the Games' closing ceremony at the 100,000-seat National Stadium in Bukit Jalil here which was packed to capacity tonight.

Games organising chairman Gen (R) Tan Sri Hashim Mohd Ali said in his closing speech that "we lived up to our expectations and our promises. The best Games ever and we all saw it here in Kuala Lumpur."

Among the highlights of the colourful ceremony was the handing over of the Commonwealth Games Federation (CGF) flag to Manchester, the host of the next Games in 2002.

Queen Elizabeth, who is also on a four-day State visit to Malaysia, was driven into the 100,000 capacity stadium accompanied by the Yang di-Pertuan Agong Tuanku Ja'afar in an open black limousine followed by the Duke of Edinburgh, Prince Philip, and the Raja Permaisuri Agong Tuanku Najihah in a similar vehicle.

The British national anthem "God Save The Queen" was played followed by Malaysia's national anthem "Negaraku" (My Country).

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, Commonwealth Games Federation (CGF) chairman Michael Fennell, Sukom Ninety-Eight Berhad executive chairman Gen (R) Tan Sri Hashim Mohd Ali, cabinet ministers and foreign dignitaries attended the four-and-the-half-hour ceremony beamed "live" worldwide.

Malaysia is the second developing country after Jamaica in 1966 to have organised the Games.

The closing ceremony was preceded by the last day of the track and field competition. The Queen, who had earlier visited the National Sports Complex took time-off to watch the men's 1,500m finals and presented medals to the winners of the 4x100m men's relay.

Like the opening ceremony, the closing was another festival of song and

dance that began with a rousing performance by a combined school brass band from Johor, Negeri Sembilan, Selangor and Kuala Lumpur followed by an upbeat song from local artist Jay Jay to get the crowd in a swinging mood.

Next was the presentation by Manchester City where the English hosts paraded their most famous son, former England and Manchester United great, Sir Bobby Charlton, who "took the ceremony to Manchester City".

The attention was then glued to the big screen for the "live" presentation via satellite from the heart of the English city where thousands of its citizens greeted their Malaysian counterparts.

From the city of the world's famous football club, CGF President Prince Edward congratulated Malaysia for hosting a wonderful Games, saying that the Malaysian people should be proud of it.

"Manchester hosted the 1934 Games and now we welcome everyone to Manchester for the first Games in the next millennium," he said.

The 15-minute presentation included songs from the group New Order, video-clippings of the city's interesting sites and its people view on the 2002 Games.

There was also a message from British Prime Minister Tony Blair who said that the year 2002 would be a very exciting year "as the biggest sporting event in the new millennium will take place."

"We welcome you to be part of it," he said.

Singers Siti Nurhaliza and Noraniza Idris then took to the stage and had the crowd tapping and swaying with a series of songs for the traditional dances of dikir barat and zapin.

This was followed by the marching in of the flag bearers and three athletes each from each country and the corps of thousands of volunteers known as Nadi 98 (Pulse of 98) who were central to the success of the Games.

The CGF flag was lowered to the Games' theme song "Forever As One" and it was trooped round the track before it was handed over to Fennell.

In an exchange of mementoes between the outgoing and future hosts, Hashim presented two specially handcrafted "rebana ubi" (traditional giant drum) to Manchester 2002 Organising Committee chairman Robert Hough.

Fennell then handed the flag to Kuala Lumpur mayor, Tan Sri Kamaruzzaman Shariff, who in turn presented it to his Manchester counterpart, Gordon Conquest.

The Queen, in her closing declaration, called upon all sportsmen and sportswomen to assemble in the next four years in Manchester to celebrate the 17th Commonwealth Games and to continue the spirit of unity.

Fireworks burst into sky as soon as Queen Elizabeth declared the Games closed.

Soon after the royal guests and other VIPs left the formal ceremony, the athletes, officials and volunteers partied on in the stadium as a two-hour concert featuring top local singers and international acts, Donna Lewis and Irish group, Corrs, got under way.

Among the locals who sang on the huge "rebana ubi"-shaped stage were Sheila Majid, Amelina, Amy, Zamani, Saleem and groups Raihan and KRU.

-- BERNAMA

AR/RAZ SHY