

11 SEP 1998

Games-opening

GLITTERING CEREMONY MARKS COMMONWEALTH GAMES OPENING

By: Tham Choy Lin

KUALA LUMPUR, Sept 11 (Bernama) -- The 16th Commonwealth Games opened amidst a glitter of fireworks and dancing lasers tonight as hosts Malaysia bid a warm and rapturous "Selamat Datang" to the record turnout of 5,000 athletes and officials from 70 countries.

Rising above the gloom of an economic crisis to bring the Games to Asia for the first time, Malaysia rolled out a grand traditional Malay welcome harking back to the ancient Malacca sultanate and paraded the best of its rich cultural diversity in the colourful six-hour extravaganza at the National Stadium.

The air tingled with a golden glow during the rousing traditional welcome ceremony by 2,000 performers who swirled and danced carrying trays of "bunga emas" (golden flowers) on their heads during a mass silat display (Malay martial art).

Malaysia's monarch, Yang di-Pertuan Tuanku Ja'afar, struck a traditional gong three times to raise the curtain for the Games, the last to be held for this century. The next Games will be hosted by Manchester in the year 2002.

A 16-cannon salute reverberated around the stadium when the King declared the Games open.

In the royal box were the Raja Permaisuri Agong Tuanku Najihah and Commonwealth Games Federation (CGF) President Prince Edward, who also represented his mother, Queen Elizabeth II. The Queen, who is the head of the Commonwealth, will close the Games on Sept 21.

Also among the VIPs were Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and his wife, Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali, CGF chairman Michael Fennell of Jamaica, International Olympic Committee president Juan Antonio Samaranch and Kuala Lumpur Mayor Tan Sri Kamaruzzaman Shariff.

Also gracing the occasion were Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah of Brunei and Fijian Prime Minister General Sitiveni Rabuka to mark Fiji's return to the Games.

Thunderous applause greeted the arrivals of the Royal couple and Dr Mahathir when they were driven into the stadium. Prince Edward and Fennell were driven to the VIP dais with made-in-Malaysia Proton Perdana cars.

Before the ceremony proper, the crowds were warmed up with a three-hour long pre-show of singing led by local pop darling Siti Nurhaliza and a nail-biting parachute jump by 16 paratroopers who had to negotiate skilfully into the narrow opening in the roof of the oval-shaped stadium.

The last parachutist to descend was dressed as Wira, the orang utan mascot for the Games.

In the march-past for athletes and officials, Canada, the previous hosts, led the way and they were followed by the other countries in alphabetical order before the Malaysian contingent came in towards the end.

As on previous occasions, the parade was a lively and eye-catching affair. Several of the Pacific island nations were dressed in grass skirts and many of the African countries were in their colorful ethnic attire.

The Canadians charmed the crowd by throwing frisbees to the spectators. Samoa stole the limelight with their impromptu tribal welcome dance and had the crowd clamouring for more.

The South African contingent stepped in a formation of the flag, the Scots with their male athletes dressed in light blue kilts marched out with a row of bag pipers in front.

The teams from Sri Lanka, Pakistan, India and Bangladesh, who have thousands of migrant workers in Malaysia, were welcomed with hearty applause.

The loudest cheers were saved for the home contingent which stepped out in stylish white and red baju kebaya and Baju Melayu led by chef-de-mission Datuk Khalid Yunus.

Shouts of "Malaysia Boleh" greeted the homesters as they rounded the track amidst the deafening roar of approval.

As soon as the athletes were settled in their seats, the stadium lights were dimmed and sounds of Malaysian rainforests filled the air as 2,000 school children dressed as birds, bees and flowers began an entrancing dance to depict the natural beauty of Malaysia.

The stadium was transformed into a sea of twinkling lights as the thousands of spectators waved light torches and camera flashes popped non-stop.

Tan Sri Hashim Mohd Ali, executive chairman of the Games organisers, Sukom Ninety Eight Bhd, then took to the rostrum to welcome the athletes and pledged to make the Games the best ever for the current millennium.

Former Commonwealth gold medalists, shuttlers Razif Sidek and Sylvia Ng, ran the final lap of the Queen's Baton run and in a touching gesture of honour, the baton was then passed to 79-year-old Koh Eng Tong to present it to Fennell.

Koh was Malaysia's first Commonwealth medalist when he won the weightlifting featherweight gold in 1950 in Auckland.

Fennell then handed the baton which contains Queen Elizabeth's message to Prince Edward who read out her message.

In her message, the Queen congratulated Malaysia and paid tribute to the Malaysian government for providing the "highest support" for the organisation of the Games which "deserves the highest praise from the whole of the Commonwealth community".

She expressed confidence that the competitors and all those who contributed to the arrangements for this Games will look forward to the experience that they will cherish all their lives.

The Queen also said that she and her husband, Prince Philip, looked forward to be in Kuala Lumpur for the final day of the Games, in particular the closing ceremony.

Three other Malaysian former greats were also honoured during the ceremony. Cyclist Daud Ibrahim, runner M.Rajamani and shuttler Yew Cheng Hoe accompanied the Commonwealth Games flag which was raised to the theme song of the Games "Forever As One" written by local composer, Goh Boon Hoe.

For the oath-taking ceremony, Malaysian bowling sensation Shalin Zulkifli, with her right hand raised and the other holding the Malaysian flag, Jalur Gemilang, read the oath on behalf of the other athletes as the flags of the participating countries were arranged in a semi-circle.

The finale of the ceremony was a 40-minute musical with the theme, "Unity Towards Progress", tracing the birth of the nation and overcoming the pains of colonisation to be an independent country and the achievements of the nation which recently celebrated its 41st national day on Aug 31.

The stirring drama centred on the assembly of a giant globe in the middle of the field ended with a recording of an excerpt of a previous speech made by Dr Mahathir: "Perjuangan belum selesai...hanya yang cecal dan tabah membina bangsanya dengan jaya."

A total of 213 gold medals will be decided over the next 10 days in an unprecedented 15 sports including the debut of rugby, cricket, netball and hockey.

Australia are again expected to return home with the lion's share for a hat-trick performance. They emerged tops with 52 golds in Auckland in 1990

and 87 in Victoria in 1994.  
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