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Malaysia Boleh - against all odds and criticisms

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THEY said we couldn't do it, they being the foreigners of course. But many Malaysians agreed with them, either openly or privately.

After all, preparing to host the Commonwealth Games was an incredibly daunting task. For while the Commonwealth Games' stature is many notches behind the grand-daddy of all games, the Olympics, its size is just one step behind.

It is a huge sporting meet with over 4,000 athletes from 70 countries, not to mention officials and VIPs. Malaysia would have to build new stadiums, roads, transport modes, accommodation, etc.

It was really no wonder that the more vocal sceptics found many followers echoing their opinions, including Malaysians who have unfond memories of many a grand announcement coming to nought.

Add the fact that only one developing country had ever hosted these Games - Jamaica in 1966 - and no Asian country, made their doubts grow.

Can Malaysia really do it?

The answer is now clear - Yes, we can and we have. The final bit of the organisational jigsaw has fallen into place, world class facilities have sprung up, and the Games have begun.

The opening ceremony on Friday was a spectacular festival of harmony and unity, a fitting display of the teamwork which went into making the Games a reality.

The Games itself still has its course to run but nothing more untoward than minor hitches and glitches are expected.

But the path from July 1992 (when Malaysia won the bid to host the Games) towards Sept 11, 1998 wasn't all smooth. In 1996 when most Malaysians were still rather vague about the Games, an alarm was sounded. All of a sudden, everyone knew, thanks to frontpage reports in national newspapers, that the building of the venues was way behind schedule.

Ministers and officials voiced their concern, and the crack of the whip obviously did much good. The work rushed ahead spurred by the Government barking close at the heels of the builders, a clear sign of governmental interest and commitment.

As Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad had said when addressing the Commonwealth Games Federation on Tuesday, this was "the first Games to receive unprecedented government support at every level".

Little more was heard until this year when Malaysians woke up to find a top-class 100,000-seater stadium in their midst, along with a host of other facilities including an LRT, new roads, a new airport and a beautiful Games Village.

Yet, despite the Malaysian Government and people having kept its promise to build world-class sports infrastructure, said Dr Mahathir, excessive criticism kept flowing in.

"We are sorry that negative reports about Malaysia and the Games we have organised still persist," the Prime Minister had told the CGF.

Everything and anything from the weather to Malaysia's strict drug laws were fodder for unkind remarks.

A sample of comments including foreign news reports:

\* 8 September '98: Reuters reported that "body surfing is not a sport at the Commonwealth Games, but if tropical rains lash Malaysia as forecast then it could become one". Heat and humidity, the report said, will also be a problem for some of the 4,000 athletes expected to take part in the

Games.

\* September '98: Stories on the Internet claimed that athletes and visitors would be in danger at the Games.

\* August '98: The head of the Australian squad Perry Crosswhite was reported as saying that his team could expect logistical problems when they arrive in Malaysia. He said Malaysia doesn't have a lot of experience with major sports events, and a lot of things could go wrong and he was sure they will. He was also quoted as saying that a number of venues had not been properly tested and the transport system was inadequate.

\* May 98: Rumours that the Commonwealth Games may be moved to Adelaide, fuelled by negative reports in certain countries about haze, financial problems and the traffic situation in Kuala Lumpur.

\* May '98: Prominent British newspaper The Observer reported that foreign athletes who took part in the 1998 Commonwealth Games would be exposed to the haze which was equivalent to smoking 1,000 cigarettes a day.

\* The Observer also quoted CGF secretary David Dixon as reminding British athletes that they could be flogged if they were tested positive for drugs such as marijuana and cocaine during the Commonwealth Games.

The report said the country's stringent laws on the use of drugs apply to competitors.

These reports and comments were exceedingly negative and misleading, if not outright lies. Some of the persons quoted have since denied making the comments.

The haze had disappeared a year ago and has not made an appearance since. Since that was no longer a problem, the normal heat and rains of a tropical climate became one.

The country's drug laws do apply to everyone but for doping in sports, the regular International Olympic Committee competition rules prevail. Athletes are not going to be flogged, jailed or hanged if they were tested positive for steroid abuse.

But despite so much sensational negativity, the Games are now up and running at a smart pace and only petty complaints had trickled in.

Happily too, the many who have come here and seen for themselves have spoken out about their wrong preconceived ideas.

For instance, English athletes told The Sunday Times of London that they were pleasantly surprised to find the "facilities first-rate and the organisation smooth".

They said they were surprised to find clear skies, "not desperately oppressive heat" and very enthusiastic Malaysians. England's team manager Ann Hogbin had said she "was not choking under a blanket of smog" nor "suffocating in murderous heat".

Similar views were heard from CGF's top officials, other foreign athletes and even grudging okays in foreign media reports.

Said a Reuters report which was filed on the same day as its report lamenting the weather here: "(Dr) Mahathir was poised to have the last laugh on his critics with smog cleared away, water shortages solved, tickets selling well and all facilities up and running."

(END)