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Safe return a priority for expedition

KUALA LUMPUR, Sun. - Although the success of the "North Pole Freefall Expedition Malaysia 1998" will be a great achievement, the safe return of participants was more important, the Prime Minister said today.

Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, the patron of the expedition, said he was more concerned about the safety of the participants.

"The people want the team to succeed. I am confident that they will succeed," he said adding that due to the danger involved, the participants should not take their tasks lightly.

The participants will jump off a helicopter from 3,500 metres at a temperature of -70 degrees Celsius.

Launching the expedition at the Royal Malaysian Air Force base in Sungai Besi, Dr Mahathir said participants, being from a tropical country, were not exposed to extreme cold conditions, hence, should not treat the expedition as a "game".

Besides the danger of them landing in a crevice and into ice cold water, winds lashing at 175km per hour could also jeopardise the jump.

The expedition, spurred by the successful scaling of Mount Everest last year, comprises 23 members including 15 parachutists, ground and TV3 camera crew.

Nordziah Mohamad Noor, 39, a mother of five, will be the sole woman parachutist to take part in the jump scheduled for 10am Malaysian time on April 18.

The Prime Minister later handed over the Malaysian flag to the expedition leader Abdul Rahim Dahalan. The flag will be placed at the drop zone to mark the success of the team.

Also "unveiled" at the ceremony was a Proton Wira which will be "dropped" over the drop zone along with the freefallers.

The 1,045kg car displaying the red, blue and yellow colours of the Malaysian flag will also bear the EON and Proton emblems.

The only other car ever dropped over the North Pole was a Volkswagen in 1994 by a German team.

The expedition is organised by the Youth and Sports Ministry and the Malaysian Parachuting Federation and financed by the various sponsors.

The 15 parachutists will attempt to freefall amidst unpredictable weather conditions.

The team will leave for Russia on April 3 where gruelling practise sessions await them in weather similar to Arctic conditions.

The free fallers will release their "ramair parachutes" (rectangle in shape), at about 750m and land on four-metre thick ice, coating waters as deep as 4,200m.

They are expected to return to Malaysia on April 23.

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