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Team practising hard for North Pole freefall

KUALA LUMPUR, Sun. - Preparing for what will be their toughest freefall experience, 16 parachutists selected for the "North Pole Freefall Expedition Malaysia 1998" have started practising in earnest for the endeavour.

The parachutists, led by expedition leader Abdul Rahim Dahalan, conducted a practice session at the Sungai Besi Royal Malaysian Air Force base today.

In groups of five and six, the parachutists jumped from a Boskym Udara Sdn Bhd Ecureil AS350 helicopter at a height of about 1,500 metres.

Nordziah Mohamad Noor, 39, a mother of five and the only woman in the team, jumped twice during the session.

The sight of parachutists gliding down to the airport caused a slight congestion at Jalan Sungai Besi as motorists stopped beside the road to get a better view.

Abdul Rahim said the team members would conduct as many practices as possible before leaving for Moscow on April 1 for acclimatisation training to prepare for the actual freefall two weeks later.

Four practice sessions have been scheduled for next week before the expedition is officially launched by its patron, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, on March 30.

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

All of the parachutists are experienced jumpers from the Armed Forces, police, the Federal Territory Parachute Club as well as the MPF.

"In Russia, the team will train at a special landing zone in Moscow for a week before moving to Kathanga, Siberia, for the last training session," said Abdul Rahim.

He said all safety precautions were being taken care of including proper clothing for the extreme temperatures expected during the expedition.

"We will be jumping from a height of about 3,500 metres where the temperature can drop below -70 degrees Celsius," he said.

The jumpers are expected to jump on the recommended dates of April 18, 19 and 20, when the weather is expected to be less hazardous.

Meanwhile, Nordziah who will be the first Asian woman to freefall at the North Pole, said she was excited to be a part of the expedition. She said she was prepared for the risks.

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