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Sports-Hang Gliding (A special report)

KINABALU CHALLENGE '99 PROVES M'SIA CAN HOST WORLD MEET

By: Jackson Sawatan

KUNDASANG, Sept 17 (Bernama) -- Yes! Mount Kinabalu, Southeast Asia's tallest peak, is an excellent venue for world-class hang gliding.

This is the verdict of international gliders after several test flights in their preparation for the four-day Kinabalu Challenge '99 Malaysian Invitational Hang Gliding Championship since yesterday.

They should know because they are also the very people and the big names from the international hang gliding fraternity who will contest in the inaugural world event at Greece's Mount Olympus next year.

Big names like world number one Manfred Ruhmer of Austria and the world record holder in women's cross-country hang gliding, Australian Tove Heiney.

So why is their endorsement so relevant?

Because Malaysia has offered to stage the second world hang gliding championship in 2003 at Mount Kinabalu.

Kinabalu Challenge '99 deputy organising chairman Lt-Col (Rtd) Basir Abdul Rahman said the gliders told him the mountain is an excellent venue for the sport.

"We will hold the preliminaries until the final on Sunday and from then on we will know whether this mountain is good for the world championship ... as for the gliders, they have tried the mountain and they just loved it," Basir said.

As part of preparations for the event, Basri himself climbed the mountain last June and instead of descending the usual way, he paraglided down in order to see for himself whether it was possible to hold the sports here.

"Paragliding is however different from hang gliding but nevertheless I am confident the hang gliding competition can be held here," said Basir.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who is on a two-day visit to Sabah, is scheduled to open the inaugural Kinabalu Challenge '99 tomorrow.

Contestants are required to take off from Mount Kinabalu's South Peak at about 4,000m above sea level and glide at several checkpoints over Kundasang before landing at the Mount Kinabalu Golf Club, some 2,000m away.

They concurred that what makes Mount Kinabalu different from other hang gliding venues is the height.

"This is fantastic because it is so high, in other places we only fly at 2,000 feet (600m) and here it is 6,000 feet (2,000m). So it is really high," said the 31-year-old Heiney.

World number one Ruhmer, 34, agreed: "I can't say it is more difficult here but the height is certainly higher...its excellent, I love it."

The Austrian said Mount Kinabalu is not only good for gliding competitions but also for recreational gliding over the scenic countryside.

Hang gliding sport is basically divided into speed and cross-country categories and the Kinabalu Challenge '99 is a speed-gliding championship.

No one can explain speed-gliding better than Murray Rose, the Federation of Aeronautics International (FAI) World Hang Gliding Series vice president and inventor of the speed glider.

"It's almost the same as ski racing, only this is airborne and it is very fast...it is formula one race with formula one gliders. They can come, sometimes, to as low as 30cm from the ground and they are doing 150km per hour," he said.

"The fastest to cross the finishing will win," said Rose who started hang gliding in 1972.

He designed his own hang glider for the sheer thrill of flying very low and very fast.

"So I invented speed gliding and put it to the pilots and asked them how they like to do this...all the top pilots just loved doing it," he said.

That was how speed gliding came into being and later in 1995 it became a competitive and endurance sport.

FAI assigned its representative Noel Whittall to observe the competition which is jointly organised by Tourism Malaysia, the Youth and Sports Ministry, Aerospace Industries Malaysia Sdn Bhd and the Sabah state government.

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