

19/09/1999

Making Sabah top tourist destination

KUNDASANG, Sat. - Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad today launched two international sporting events at the foot of Mount Kinabalu, which are expected to make Malaysia, and Sabah in particular, a premier tourist destination.

The events are the prestigious 15th World Mountain Running Trophy (WMRT) and the Malaysia Invitation Hang-gliding Championship "Kinabalu Challenge '99".

Dr Mahathir, who arrived here in a helicopter from Kota Kinabalu, said the two championships were meaningful in terms of promoting tourism.

Launching the WMRT, hosted for the first time by an Asian country, the Prime Minister said he would like to see an international invitational mountain running championship be held at the foot of Mount Kinabalu, Southeast Asia's highest peak, every year.

Malaysia, through the Malaysian Amateur Athletic Union and the Sabah Tourism Promotion Corporation, made the bid to host the WMRT in 1997 and won.

Welcoming the athletes and officials, Dr Mahathir hoped they would tell the people in their respective countries about the beauty of Malaysia and how they enjoyed their stay.

The championship was divided into the men's section covering a distance of 12.5km, women (7.8km), junior men (7.8km) and junior women (4.1km).

"I invite all of you to come back and participate in our future mountain running competitions," he said.

The WMRT, to be held tomorrow, attracted a record 361 participants from 33 countries. It is the biggest gathering of mountain runners since the inception of the championship in 1985.

What started as an endurance and fitness test for Kinabalu park rangers in 1985, has become the annual international Mount Kinabalu Climbathon and culminated with the hosting of the World Mountain Running Trophy.

Also present was World Mountain Running Association (WMRA) president Danny Hughes, Chief Minister Datuk Seri Osu Sukam and State and Federal Ministers.

Hughes presented the event's first gold medal to Dr Mahathir as a token of appreciation for his attendance.

After launching the WMRT, Dr Mahathir proceeded to the nearby Mount Kinabalu Golf Club to officiate at the Malaysia Invitation Hang-gliding championship Kinabalu Challenge '99 which he had mooted.

The event was jointly organised by the Federal Youth and Sports Ministry, Aerospace Industries Sdn Bhd, Malaysia Tourism Promotion Board and the Sabah Government.

Accompanied by Osu, Youth and Sports Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin and Aerospace Industries executive chairman Tan Sri Ahmad Johan, Dr Mahathir witnessed some of the participants who took off from Mount Kinabalu's South Peak (3,647 metres) landing at the golf course.

He hoped the foreign participants in the Kinabalu Challenge would spread the word about how ideal Mount Kinabalu was for hang-gliding.

"I hope all of you will retain a wonderful memory about Sabah and will make the Kinabalu Challenge an item in your annual calendar," he said.

The Prime Minister said the championship should be held annually as Mount Kinabalu was recognised by para-gliders from all over the world as an ideal place for para-gliding.

Dr Mahathir hoped that efforts would be taken to train local people who were interested in the sport to ensure more local participation.

He was also confident para-gliding from the peak of Mount Kinabalu would become a major tourist attraction.

Malaysia was making a bid to host the 2003 World Hang-gliding championship at Mount Kinabalu and Dr Mahathir was optimistic it would be successful.

"I hope the year 2003 will see the culmination of our efforts to promote the sport," he said, adding that Malaysia was one of the few tropical countries which provided beautiful scenery for hang-gliders.

Officials from the World Hang-gliding governing body, the FAI World Hang-gliding Series, are here to assess the suitability of holding the world championship at Mount Kinabalu.

On tourism in Malaysia, Dr Mahathir said the Government would take full advantage of its many tourism assets, such as rivers and beautiful valleys which were not found in other countries, to lure foreign tourists.

"What is needed is for us to fully exploit the country's natural beauty to attract tourists," he said.

(END)