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Polls `flag-off' steals the show from 4x4 race

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EIGHTY adventure seekers, mostly from Kuala Lumpur and including several foreigners, were in Raub recently to take part in a four-wheel-drive expedition which took them four days into the interior of this once gold-rich district.

The Raub 4X4 Golden Challenge `99, planned to be a "big thing" in this sleepy town, was meant to be an easy and plain-sailing tourism event.

But like the rest of the nation, the organiser was caught by surprise when Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad announced the dissolution of Parliament, thus shifting the public's focus to the much-awaited poll.

However, the show must go on and despite the last-minute withdrawals which threatened the event, it was held as scheduled.

It was close to 9pm and drizzling when the convoy from Kuala Lumpur reached Raub, about 120km from the capital city and promptly guided to Lata Jarum, a picturesque recreational park in Hulu Dong, 22km from the town.

The serenity of the area was immediately "disturbed" by the sounds of the four-wheel vehicles as they drove to the park which is only 50 metres away from the house where the body of murdered politician Datuk Mazlan Idris was found.

The convoy attracted some attention. Not since the much publicised case involving Mona Fandey did the kampung folks witness so many visitors in the area at that hour.

When it was time to flag-off the participants the following day, the anticipated crowd was not there. Another "flagging-off" was taking place in Raub town the same morning.

The nomination day not only "robbed" the event of local attention but also Datuk Shahiruddin Ab Moin, who was scheduled to do the honours of sending-off the participants to the jungle.

Shahiruddin, who was Pahang's Culture, Arts and Tourism Committee chairman prior to the dissolution and the brainchild behind the Raub 4X4 Golden Challenge, was at that time in the district office filing his nomination papers to defend his Dong state seat.

"It's too bad the date had to clash but I have another flagging-off to make at the same time," apologised the Raub Umno chief referring to the start of his campaign trail to defend the seat he won when making his debut in the last general election.

"If the participants are going to have many obstacles in the jungle, I am expecting the same here. It's a big task ahead," quipped the former Senator who was a senior auditor with Bank Negara before he resigned to enter politics.

For someone who is defending his seat for the first time, Shahiruddin has his hands full as he is not only expected to retain his seat but also lead four Barisan Nasional candidates, including MCA Wanita chairman Datuk Dr Ng Yen Yen, who are standing for the first time.

However, he felt with the support he has received, he believed BN would be able to retain all its four seats and was also confident of wresting the Teras State seat from the DAP.

Shahiruddin is facing Pas' Mejar (B) Solahuddin Shamsuddin for the Dong state seat while businessman Ng Kwi Leng, who is Pahang DAP treasurer, is the Opposition's candidate for the Raub parliamentary seat.

Besides Dr Ng, BN's other new faces are Mohd Sofi Tan Sri Abdul Razak and Tengku Faris Tengku Razlan who are also facing straight fights with oppositon front candidates for the Benta and Batu Talam state seats respectively.

MCA's Chan Choon Fah is attempting to unseat incumbent DAP's Lip Tuck Chee for the Teras seat.

The Raub constituency with 52,989 voters has a multi-racial electorate with Malays making 48.34 per cent, Chinese 42.3 per cent, Indians 7.69 per cent and others, mainly Orang Asli, 1.59 per cent.

On his chances, Shahiruddin said BN's record in the constituency and throughout the country would swing the votes to the BN.

Shahiruddin also said he was impressed with Dr Ng's confidence in facing the voters despite this being her debut.

When approached during her campaign trail in Sungai Klau, a predominantly Chinese area mainly made up of farmers, Dr Ng attributed the voters' acceptance of her to Shahiruddin whom she described as a hardworking leader.

"He makes it a point to accompany us during our rounds and that makes things easier for us to meet the voters," said Chan, who is facing a tough battle to unseat the DAP incumbent in Teras.

However, the modest Shahiruddin said despite making their debut, his BN colleagues were able and worthy and hoped the voters would give them a chance to serve.

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