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Sports-Hang Gliding

WORLD TOP HANG GLIDERS GIVE THUMB UP TO MT KINABALU

KUNDASANG, Sept 15 (Bernama) -- Top hang gliders from around the world today gave their thumb up to Mount Kinabalu, the venue for the Malaysia invitation hang gliding championship "Kinabalu Challenge '99" this weekend.

After doing some tests on the course, they found the mountain challenging, beautiful and spectacular -- an ideal recipe for a good competition for the airborne sport.

The "Kinabalu Challenge '99" -- the first to be held in the country and one which will put Malaysia on the world map for hang gliding sports -- will be opened by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad on Saturday.

It is being jointly sponsored by the Youth and Sports Ministry, Aerospace Industries Malaysia Sdn Bhd, the Sabah State Government and Malaysia Tourism Promotion Board.

World number one hang glider Manfred Ruhmer of Austria said the course was challenging and is also most spectacular.

"I never take off so high, so it was definitely a different experience. I don't think it is more difficult here, but certainly the height is a little bit more than usual...I think it is excellent, I love it," Ruhmer, 34, told reporters at the Mount Kinabalu Golf Club here after a morning practice session today.

The competition which starts tomorrow, would require gliders to take off from the vicinity of the South Peak of Mount Kinabalu at about 3,660 metres above sea level, followed by circling at various points over Kundasang area and landing, at a very high speed too, at the golf club some 1,580 metres down.

On the gliding speed, FAI (Federation Aeronautics International) World Hang Gliding Series vice-president Murray Rose, said it could be as fast as 150km per hour and at some competitions previously, the competitors were gliding at such speed at a little bit more than 30cm above the ground.

"It is all about speed and skills and you've got to be a very, very good pilot to do that...definitely it is not something for the beginners to do," he said.

It is like the ski racing, the only difference is that hang gliding is airborne.

Another top hang glider, Tove Heiney, 31, of Australia, who is currently the world record holder for women cross-country, said Mount Kinabalu is definitely good for a world championship, except that the competitors need to get up early to avoid the cloud build up at noon.

"This is fantastic because it is so high. In most places that I have been to, we only fly at the height of about 2,000 feet," she said.

Heiney achieved her world record in a competition in Australia, last year after she hang glided for a record distance of 370km in seven-and-a-half-hours.

Heiney would be among 10 international hang gliders from the United States, Australia, Ukraine, United Kingdom, Italy, Germany and France participating in the event.

Meanwhile, officials from the world hang gliding governing body, the FAI World Hang Gliding Series, who were here to assess the suitability of the mountain to host a world championship, said they found the place to be one of the most difficult technically.

Malaysia has expressed its intention to host the world hang gliding

championship here in 2003.

Asked whether Mount Kinabalu has all the requirements to host a world championship, FAI's Rose said: "That is what we are trying to find out. It may need a lot of infrastructure to do it here and I hope that by next year we can include this place in a world hang gliding grand prix series," he said.

Rose, who designed his own hang gliders and later used them in the speed gliding sport in 1995, said currently the world grand prix series include San Francisco, Canada, Brazil, Mount Olympus, New Zealand, Korea and "if everybody wants it to happen in Malaysia, it will happen."

Meanwhile, the local organisers are making the final preparation to ensure the success of the event.

Today, they passed perhaps their most crucial test when they managed to transport participants and the hang gliders to the starting point using the Russian-made helicopter owned by the Fire and Rescue Department, flown here to assist in the preparation.

The organising committee also enlisted the army to ensure the success of the inaugural event.

-- BERNAMA

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