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Sports vital in uniting Malaysians: PM

PENANG, Sat: Sports play an important role in the country as it binds people of all ethnic backgrounds into one cohesive unit, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said tonight.

"Because of our cultural diversity, sports allow us to forge ties with various races and build one Malaysian nation which is harmonious and full of sporting spirit," he said when closing the 8th Sukma games at the state stadium on Batu Kawan island.

The development in local sports will also help strengthen racial ties and sustain the country's freedom and independence, he added.

Mahathir, who arrived at the stadium at 9.30pm, urged the athletes to cultivate high levels of fighting spirit in sports so that Malaysia can go beyond just hosting international games with superb facilities but poor athletes.

"We are hopeful about hosting the Olympics in time to come. But we can't be a good host without world-class athletes to field in the games.

"And this is why we need to be diligent in further developing our sports and strengthening

our fighting spirit which will eventually make us better achievers," he said.

He commended the athletes on creating 82 new Sukma records and eight national records, referring to the breakthrough as a "clear development in local sports".

In his speech, Penang Chief Minister Tan Sri Koh Tsu Koon said that he was elated by the state's performance in the games, it's best since the games began in 1986.

"Penang has performed the best this time around compared with previous games although we were four golds short of the 38 gold target and a possible overall third placing," he added.

He said the games went on "fine" through the 11 days although there were several setbacks which affected its smooth running.

"We, as the host, have done our best to run the games according to our Penang tradition. But as humans, it is only natural that we were not able to run away from mistakes. We apologise if there was anything less than perfect," he added.

He offered Penang's help to Sabah which will host the next games in 2002.