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SEA-Opening

21ST SEA GAMES OPENS AMID SOLIDARITY IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

By: D.Arul Rajoo

KUALA LUMPUR, Sept 8 (Bernama) -- The first SEA Games of the new millennium got off to a glittering and joyous start tonight at the National Stadium in Bukit Jalil, setting the tempo for fostering greater solidarity and friendship through sports among all the 10 Asean nations.

The upbeat mood at the opening ceremony of the 21st SEA Games was symbolic of Southeast Asia's recovery from a financial crisis that hit the region in 1997 and ensuing political turmoil here and there, and signified an era of re-awakening in the region.

The state-of-the-art National Stadium was a spectrum of sparkling colours exuded by the fireworks and dancing lasers in an expression of Malaysia's multiracial society as the host welcomed the 6,000 athletes and officials, an occasion witnessed by thousands at the stadium and millions on television nationwide.

"It is with pleasure that I declare open the 21st SEA Games," proclaimed the Yang di-Pertuan Agong Sultan Salahuddin Abdul Aziz Shah, giving the cue for a 10-gun salute to reverberate around the stadium.

For the first time, the opening ceremony was held simultaneously in Johor and Penang which will host some of the events of the Games. Negeri Sembilan is another state given the honour of hosting a few events.

The 21st SEA Games is the fifth to be hosted by Malaysia which staged the best-ever Commonwealth Games in 1998. Malaysia last hosted the SEA Games in 1989.

For the next nine days, athletes from the 10 countries will engage in friendly competition to win the 391 gold medals at stake. But beyond the competition, the Games reflect a region which sees improving economies and political stability.

It is being held at a time when Thailand, the Philippines and Indonesia are helmed by new political leaders, when Malaysia and Singapore have resolved some long-standing differences and when the countries of Indochina are becoming more stable.

"Harmonious diplomatic ties among nations cannot be sustained purely by close rapport among the leaders. Without roots, the growth of trees cannot be sustained.

"Indeed, it was with the aim of fostering closer friendship among the peoples of Southeast Asia that the SEAP Games were inaugurated in Bangkok in 1959," Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad had said in his Games' message.

A thunderous applause greeted the arrival of the Yang di-Pertuan Agong and Raja Permaisuri Agong Tuanku Siti Aishah and Dr Mahathir and his wife Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali as the two couples were driven separately into the 100,000-capacity stadium.

Among the VIPs at the opening ceremony were Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra of Thailand and Jose Miguel Arroyo, husband of President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo of the Philippines, their presence lending credence to Asean solidarity. Thaksin's attendance also reflected Thailand's close association with a Games that Bangkok was the first to host.

Other VIPs included Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, Youth and Sports Minister Datuk Hishammuddin Tun Hussein and Olympic Council of Malaysia and SEA Games Federation President Tunku Imran Tuanku Ja'afar.

A concert by Malaysian artistes that began at 6pm preceded the six-hour

opening ceremony extravaganza.

But even before the opening ceremony got underway, Indonesia clinched the first gold medal of the Games through the women's team trap event as four gold medals were decided today in equestrian, gymnastics and shooting.

Unlike in the past where the portrayal of cultural elements took centre-stage in an opening ceremony, Malaysia gave emphasis this time to human formations which began with a multi-racial martial arts display by 1,500 Rakan Waja Diri members accompanied by a rendition by 70 members of a multi-racial Gendang group.

A 20-minute human formation display consisting of 1,400 dancers with twinkling lights and breathtaking stunts had the spectators on their feet. It portrayed a highly cultured Malaysian society that was strong, energetic and full of discipline.

There was the customary parachute jump, of course. Fourteen persons floated into the stadium bearing the flags of the 10 participating countries and the SEA Games Federation. Three of the parachutists were attired as the squirrel, Si Tumas, the mascot of the Games.

The highlight, as in all Games in the series, was the marching in of the athletes and officials of the 10 countries, resplendent in their traditional attire.

The contingent of Brunei, which hosted the Games for the first time two years ago, marched in first followed by those of Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and the next Games host Vietnam.

The Singapore contingent received loud cheers when they marched in with two banners which read "Team Singapore mengucapkan tahniah kepada Malaysia atas kejayaan menganjur Sukan SEA ke-21".

Malaysia's athletes and officials, dressed in their traditional "baju Melayu" and "kebaya" and led by chef de mission Datuk Mazlan Ahmad, received the loudest applause from the spectators.

Thailand, hoping to repeat their feat of garnering the most number of medals at the Brunei SEA Games, have sent the largest contingent of 650 athletes. At the other extreme, Cambodia are represented by 85 athletes.

For the first time in the history of the 42-year-old Games, nine former greats from the Asean countries, including Asian sprint queen Lydia de Vega, joined 12 Malaysians in the final lap of the torch run which reached the stadium after a nationwide tour.

Former Malaysian sporting greats given the honour were former footballer Datuk Soh Chin Aun, sprint queen Marina Bhatt (Chin), cyclist Daud Ibrahim and swimming sensation Nurul Huda Abdullah.

Daud used the torch to light a gadget that sent the flame through a special conduit to the cauldron located some 150m away. National 400m hurdles champion Norasheela Khalid read out the oath on behalf of the athletes.

The chefs de mission of the 10 countries were then introduced to the Yang di-Pertuan Agong.

A fireworks display at the tail-end of the ceremony lit up the sky as Malaysia once again welcomed its guests with a warm "Selamat Datang".

The first take of the script has been successfully played out. Now, it is up to the athletes, officials and spectators to make the Games one of the best in the series, if not the best ever.

In Penang, some 5,000 people thronged the Penang International Sports Arena (PISA) square to witness the opening ceremony which was officiated at by Yang Dipertua Negeri Tun Abdul Rahman Abbas.

After Abdul Rahman's arrival at about 8.55pm, the contingents marched in with Brunei taking the lead, followed by Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam and Malaysia.

World women's junior squash champion Nicol David carried the Jalur Gemilang for the Malaysian contingent which was led by deputy chef de mission Datuk Dosmy Ibrahim.

The Games officially got underway when Abdul Rahman symbolically placed his hand on a crystal ball, and this was followed by a 10-minute fireworks display which lit up the sky over PISA Square.

After the 10 contingents were introduced to Abdul Rahman, popular singer M. Nasir staged a concert to entertain the crowd.

Four sports -- bowling, judo, squash and wushu -- are being staged in Penang involving 669 athletes and officials.

In JOHOR BAHRU, almost 15,000 people witnessed a colourful opening ceremony, which included traditional dances and a 15-minute fireworks display, at Stadium Larkin.

Johor Menteri Besar Datuk Abdul Ghani Othman hit the Jidor traditional drum three times to usher in the Games.

The 10 contingents then staged a march-past.

The ceremony was also livened up by performances from veteran singer Tan Sri S.M. Salim and several other local artistes.

Johor Baharu is staging four sports -- weightlifting, taekwondo, archery and silat.

-- BERNAMA

MHI YBY