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SEA-Closing

MALAYSIA REJOICE AS SEA GAMES END

By: David Chelliah

KUALA LUMPUR, Sept 17 (Bernama) -- The curtain fell here tonight on the 21st SEA Games in a celebration of colour, music and joy after 10 days of friendly competition that saw Malaysia assume the overall championship for the first time in the history of the regional games.

Even as the SEA Games flame was dying out after Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad declared the games closed, the National Stadium in Bukit Jalil erupted into a massive party of 100,000 people.

The 10 days of toil, sweat and tears had brought out the best -- and in instances the worst -- in competition among the estimated 3,500 athletes but tonight it was a different story altogether as they let their hair down and mingled freely in the spirit of Asean friendship and solidarity.

Malaysia's celebration as the overall champion had an icing to the cake as well when Malaysian horse-rider Mohd Qabil Ambak Mahamad Fathil was announced as the Asean Sportsman.

Thailand, the overall runner-up, had reason to rejoice as well. Their sprinter, Supavadee Khawpeag, was honoured as the Asean Sportswoman.

"I hereby declare the SEA Games closed and call upon youths in Southeast Asia to assemble in two years' time in Hanoi to celebrate the games," said Dr Mahathir in officially closing the 21st games.

The closing ceremony was also telecast live nationwide.

Malaysia's victory as overall champion since the inception of the games as the SEAP Games in 1959 and which came with 111 gold, 75 silver and 85 bronze medals won in competition has given enough reason for the nation to determine the future of the country's sports.

Youth and Sports Minister Datuk Hishammuddin Tun Hussein said earlier in the day that a paper on the development of sports would be submitted to the Cabinet and that its acceptance would see a standard and excellence in national sports in a short time.

At tonight's closing ceremony, which carried the theme "Asean: A Time to Celebrate", the slight drizzle earlier in the evening failed to dampen the spirit of the spectators who had come early to catch performances by Malaysia's top artistes, among whom were Erra Fazira and Ziana Zain.

Parachutists set the ball rolling for the ceremony proper when they floated into the stadium bearing the national flags of the 10 participating countries as a choir sang the "Jalur Gemilang" song.

The traditional marching in of the contingents by sport rather than by country was greeted with a thunderous applause as cameras flashed away to record the proceedings. First to march in were the aquatics athletes, then archery, then athletics and the rest.

The highlight of the musical celebration was the "Citrawarna Malaysia" (Colours of Malaysia) by 300 performers and 50 drummers comprising songs and traditional dances reflective of the diversity of multi-racial Malaysia.

It was an emotional moment when the SEA Games flame was extinguished to symbolise the end of the 21st games, after which the Southeast Asian Games Federation (SEAGF) flag was lowered to the accompaniment of the Games' theme song.

SEAGF chairman and the Olympic Council of Malaysia (OCM) president Tan Sri Tunku Imran Tuanku Ja'afar then handed the flag to Vietnam National Olympic Committee president Nguyen Danh Thai, who is Vietnam's Sports Minister.

Vietnam, the host of the 22nd SEA Games in 2003, then staged a cultural show entitled "Welcome to Vietnam" by a group of Vietnamese girls with a hoisted giant red flag.

The spectators broke into cheers when fireworks went off overhead and 21 mountaineers abseiled from the stadium's top to distribute goodies for lucky fans. Balloons and confetti were released as the crowd cheered for more.

The closing ceremony was simple but it reflected the cultural depth of the participating countries as the celebration was not only for sportsmen and sportswomen but for the diversity of people within the context of a unified Asean.

The first SEA Games of the new millennium also scored several other firsts. It earned for Cambodia their first gold medal in 28 years, and opened a new dimension for the participation of women in sports in that country.

Duch Sophorn, 24 and Ke Leng, 35, won the gold medal in the doubles event of Petanque which made its debut at the 21st games.

Laos, another Indochinese country, also picked up a gold medal in Petanque. The victory would be cherished as it is the second gold -- after the first one was garnered at the Brunei Games two years ago -- for the nation in the 42-year history of the games.

The 21st Games also provided an eight-member think tank from Vietnam the opportunity to study all aspects of organisation of the games in preparation for the next games Vietnam will host.

For Malaysian sports, winning the overall championship is not the peak of achievement in sports but the beginning of a new era in excellence for world-class meets such as next year's Asian Games in Pusan and the Commonwealth Games in Manchester.

The Malaysian athletes have repaid the trust and made worthwhile the RM46 million spent in training them for this games, proving that "Malaysia Boleh" (Malaysia Can).

Having greeted athletes and officials with a warm "Selamat Datang" at a glittering opening ceremony 10 days ago, Malaysia today brought the games to a successful end.

Apart from emerging overall champions for the first time in history, the Malaysians have also proven themselves to be excellent hosts.

Goodbye Kuala Lumpur. Till we meet again in Hanoi in 2003.

-- BERNAMA

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