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Development bearing fruit

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THE good showing in the Manchester Commonwealth Games has convinced Sports Minister Datuk Hishammuddin Hussein that Malaysian sports is on the rise.

An indicator is the fact that national athletes are beginning to win events which Malaysia is traditionally not strong in.

"Our athletes are beginning to show improvement in sports that we have not been strong in and this is very encouraging," Hishammuddin told a Press conference after chairing his ministry's post cabinet meeting in Kuala Lumpur yesterday.

Hishammuddin also feels that Malaysia does not have to import foreign talent and this means that the National Sports Council's plans of offering citizenship to "outsiders" is on hold.

However, foreign coaches are still needed as it was through their expertise that Malaysia made an impact in weightlifting, gymnastics, squash and lawn bowls.

"We do still need the services of foreign coaches but I must commend the improvement made by some of our local coaches. Cheah Soon Kit, in particular, has shown tremendous ability in guiding the women doubles pair to a gold medal for the first time," said Hishammuddin.

Hishammuddin, in conveying Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's congratulations to the contingent, said the improved performance proves the national athletes are able to compete in sports in which they have not traditionally been strong in.

"As for foreign athletes being given citizenship, I don't think we need to do that right now.

"This also proves the success of our Jaya '98 and Gemilang 2001 programmes. We have produced good athletes. Now the focus and concentration will be on the Busan Asian Games," said Hishammuddin.

The Jaya '98 programme was aimed towards preparing the athletes for the Kuala Lumpur Commonwealth Games while the 2001 programme helped Malaysia emerge overall champions in the Sea Games.

In fact, the National Sports Council has already started the 2006 programme which is aimed at the Doha Asian Games and Melbourne Commonwealth Games.

But these Games are four years away.

Busan is only a month away and the NSC, based on the Manchester showing, is confident the athletes can improve on the five-gold achievement in Bangkok four years ago.

NSC director of international preparations Ahmad Shapawi Ismail said that Malaysia should have no problem doing well in Busan.

"We are satisfied with the national athletes' performance in Manchester although we lost several gold medals," said Shapawi at the Kuala Lumpur International Airport yesterday.

"This fine showing has given us the confidence that we can do better in Busan than the five-gold haul in Bangkok from four years ago".

Malaysia's best Asian Games outing was in 1966 in Bangkok when they won seven gold, five silver and six bronze medals.

Although Shapawi was non-committal on whether Malaysia was capable of bettering the 1966 medal haul, there is a bright possibility it could be achieved.

In fact, this is the target the national athletes have to be set.

