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Malik completes historic Channel swim

Zaharah Othman

MARATHON swimmer Abdul Malik Mydin reached the shore of Cap Gris Nez in Calais, France, last night to become the first Malaysian to swim across the English Channel.

He arrived at 8.42pm French time (7.42pm British time, 2.42am today Malaysian time), completing the feat in just under 18 hours.

Malik could have made it hours earlier if not for the very windy weather during the last few kilometres of his swim.

About 50 Malaysian well-wishers who were waiting at the finish line greeted him.

Earlier, strong winds had slowed down Malik's progress along the home stretch, but journalists following him in two other boats reported that the swimmer was coping well.

Malik started his feat at Abbots Beach in Dover at 2.02am local time (9.02am Malaysian time), stopping for feeds at 20-minute intervals, with his strokes at a consistent pace.

Malik had spent the day before the swim relaxing in preparation for the marathon swim which will take him 32.8km across from Dover to Cap Gris Nez.

He emerged with his coach and supporters half-an-hour past midnight to make the short walk from the hotel where he was staying to the marina, where he boarded a boat that took him to Abbots Beach. Malik was greeted by supporters who had started to arrive from London, and a procession of well-wishers and journalists soon formed behind him.

The group of well-wishers, including staff of the Malaysian Students Department in London and their families and journalists nearly missed the important occasion when they were stopped from going down the cliff to the narrow stretch of pebbled beach where Malik was to take the plunge but were later allowed to proceed.

Earlier, Malik was expected to be flagged off at Shakespeare Beach, but at the last minute, navigator Mike Oram felt it was better for him to leave from Abbots Beach.

A few metres from the beach, Malik jumped from his boat and swam ashore and waited for instructions from his coach, John van Wisse.

At 2.02am local time, Malik started his marathon swim accompanied by shouts of Malaysia Boleh and "Go, Malik, Go," breaking the eerie silence of the early morning hours.

"It is really an honour for us to be here and to witness this historic moment. It shows that Malik Boleh and Malaysia Boleh," said Datuk Kamaruddin Mohd Nor, the Malaysian Students Department director who brought his family along.

Datuk Ab Ghani Ariffin, district officer of Seberang Prai Utara, who was on a business trip, stayed behind to offer his support.

Also present was Alison Streeter, known as Queen of the Channel for her 41 attempts across the Channel. Streeter, also Malik's coach and consultant, said once Malik was in the water, all fear and anxieties would disappear and the swimmer would be very focused on his target.

In Putrajaya, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad last night expressed his pride over the abilities and determination of Malaysians as shown by Malik and shuttler Wong Choong Hann.