

'Little' unsung hero saves Mount Kinabalu trekkers
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By Desmond Davidson and Mohd Farhan Darwis

Slightly built and standing less than five feet tall, Richard Soibi, 49, was part of the first search and rescue mission for trekkers on Mount Kinabalu, working in the cold the dark following the earthquake that shook Sabah on Friday.

With more than 20 years experience under his belt, the mountain guide said that a group of 32 guides who were leading 103 climbers up the mountain, had gathered at Laban Rata, before starting their journey down to the foothills after dark at 8pm.

Laban Rata is the last point with supplies such as food and lodging before climbers can continue their trek to the peak.

The group, which at first moved in smaller groups then got together and formed a single larger one when climbing down the mountain that night.

Speaking to The Malaysian Insider in Kundasang late last night, Richard said that despite the cold weather and the risk of aftershocks, the group continued to trek for 10 hours before they arrived at Timpohon, which is at the foothills of the mountain.

"To get down to Laban Rata from the top, we usually take three hours and from there to the foothills another seven to eight hours," he said.

The group was then assisted by 90 mountain guides who arrived later with food and medical supplies as well as stretchers to aid the injured.

Richard, who used to work as an assistant researcher in Taman Kinabalu said the group took a longer time than usual given the condition of the trek that was partly destroyed and covered with dislodged stones following the 5.9-magnitude quake.

"We were anxious, we needed to look out for our friends' safety, everybody was coming down in the dark," he said, relating the initial hours after the quake when they were directed by Taman Negara officials to carry out the mission.

The group of tour guides were among the first that succeeded in bringing down the climbers from the peak before the search and rescue mission was taken over by the authorities.

Richard related how they had to undergo emergency assistance and technical training every year, adding that he had about 250 guides in his team.

"To qualify as a guide, you cannot be physically disabled and must speak Malay and bits of other foreign languages.

"Emergency and other technical training is conducted yearly by Taman Negara," he

added.

The search and rescue mission for another six trekkers is entering its third day.

Richard said that today, their assistance would be needed to show the way to the safety team that has taken over the mission.

"Most likely we would need to give directions, we will lead the way to the accident site where they are sure to be bodies, about 700m from Laban Rata, between KM 6.5 and 7," he added.

However, he is not hopeful that the rest will be found alive.

"I don't think they are alive, but it is our duty to find them.

"The main obstacle would be that there is no path, it will depend on the expertise of the guides," said Richard.

The 5.9-magnitude quake struck 14km northwest of Ranau, and tremors were felt in Tambunan, Pedalaman, Tuaran, Kota Kinabalu and Kota Belud.

Aftershocks were felt on Friday night, at 9.10pm measuring 4.3 in magnitude, according to news reports, and again at 11.13pm and 11.32pm, according to the Facebook page of the Malaysian Meteorological Department.

The last two aftershocks were smaller, measuring 4.3 and 2.8 in magnitude, it said. – June 7, 2015.

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