

Headline **Running to save lives**
Date **08 Mar 2010**
MediaTitle **The Star**
Section **StarTwo**
Journalist **N/A**
Frequency **Daily**
Circ / Read **293,375 / 1,026,812**

Language **English**
Page No **T11**
Article Size **402 cm²**
Color **Full Color**
ADValue **15,044**
PRValue **45,131**



Running to save lives

**One man joins the
race of a lifetime
to raise funds for
Malaysian Aids
Foundation.**

MICHELLE M.Y. CHAN

UNFORGIVING heat, scorching sand, biting cold, blisters and painkillers. And, that's just the first day of the Des Sables marathon. Dubbed the "toughest footrace on earth", it is six days of running, walking (or limping, if you will) across the Sahara desert over a distance of 243km in the brutal midday heat and experiencing sub-zero temperatures at night.

Marathon des Sables began in 1986 and is held at the Moroccan desert every year. This year, in conjunction with the 25th anniversary of the race, the course has been extended to 250km. The marathon starts on April 2 and ends on April 12.

Yet, this annual race has no lack of participants. This year, out of more than 900 competitors from 43 nations, the oldest participant is 75 years old and the youngest, 11.

Malaysia will be represented by first-time participant Ralph Justin Dixon, who is running to raise funds for the Malaysian Aids Foundation (MAF). The 25th Marathon Des Sables, or "Marathon of the Sands" will be the 45-year-old seasoned runner's most gruelling physical and mental challenge.

Besides the extreme climate, competitors have to carry all their own supplies for the entire race. Just imagine that you're running five and a half marathons back-to-back while carrying all your personal belongings and food over sand dunes and scorching hot gravel plains.

"I picked this marathon because it is the hardest and most difficult race to run," says Dixon, a trustee of the MAF and also Director of Environmental Investments in YTL Corporation Bhd.

Easing into his office chair, Dixon explains that he will be lugging his own provisions, which includes dehydrated food, medical kit, sleeping bag and other outdoor survival paraphernalia. Water will be given at every check-point.

The physical pounding aside, it takes mental preparation, determination and endurance to finish the race. In the blazing desert heat and weakened physical condition, it is often the will to continue that overcomes the body's screams to stop and throw in the towel.

Dixon's cost of participation is self-borne and amounts to RM30,000. His aim? To raise RM300,000 for the MAF project in Baram, Sarawak. A strong believer in advocacy, awareness and education of HIV/AIDS, Dixon has always been disturbed by the discrimination and stigma caused by the disease.

"People living with HIV are particularly sidelined in Malaysia, and we have to eradicate that," he says.

No stranger to the marathon scene, the Penangite has been consistently running for 15 years. While enjoying his involvement in local triathlons and races, Dixon's pursuit had taken him to numerous races in Taiwan, Singapore and Japan. One memorable race was the 1996 Japan triathlon where he represented Malaysia. As he recalled, "it was the coldest!"

To prepare for the Des Sables, Dixon runs 100km a week, and can be seen in Putrajaya on Sundays clocking up his 40km. On certain weekdays he runs an average of 20km a day. He also hikes with his backpack in the Forest Research Institute of Malaysia, lugging 5kg to 8kg on his back each time.

The funds raised from the marathon will be used to start a pilot project in Baram, a delta of 23,000sqkm recently identified as an area of pressing need where HIV infection is concerned.

"With the funds from the run, we hope to begin a two-year project gathering statistics as to the prevalence of the infection," says Bakthiar Talhah, MAF's executive director.

Sarawak has a significantly different epidemic profile compared with Peninsular Malaysia, according to Bakthiar. "In the Peninsula, MAF focuses on clean-needle and

Headline **Running to save lives**
Date **08 Mar 2010**
MediaTitle **The Star**
Section **StarTwo**
Journalist **N/A**
Frequency **Daily**
Circ / Read **293,375 / 1,026,812**

Language **English**
Page No **T11**
Article Size **402 cm²**
Color **Full Color**
ADValue **15,044**
PRValue **45,131**

harm-reduction programs, while in Sarawak it is a more generalised approach, such as HIV awareness in schools," he says.

This, he explains, is because Peninsular Malaysia has a male-female HIV infection ratio of 80:20, whereas in Sarawak, it is 50:50. In the former, the epidemic is prevalent among drug users. In Sarawak, the disease is usually brought into the villages by tribal men who contract the virus after leaving their villages to work in bigger towns and cities.

"We are working with different NGOs and Christian missionaries, and hope to be able to sustain the project," says Bakhtiar.

Currently, there are different pockets of activities going on. Language, logistics and costs are major obstacles. It takes two or three days for medical supplies to reach tribal villages, and it can cost more to fly from one interior location to another, compared with flying from Kuala Lumpur to London!

So far, less than half the amount has been raised. The sponsors are Shell, L'Oreal, Jobstreet, Munchy's, MAA, YTL Corporation Bhd, Air Asia X and the Youth and Sports Ministry.

■ *For further details or if you would like to sponsor this project, contact MAF (☎ 03-4045 1033 / fax: 03-4042 6133 / mac.org.my / Facebook Group: Malaysian AIDS Council).*



Gruelling run: 'I picked this marathon because it is the hardest and most difficult race to run,' says Ralph Justin Dixon.