An honour and privilege for everyone, says PM Lee; now for the countdown to the main event

BY CARL SKADIAN
News Editor

THE news that Singapore waited over seven months for came at precisely 7.11pm yesterday, broadcast live via satellite link from Lausanne in Switzerland.

It was delivered by International Olympic Committee (IOC) president Jacques Rogge, who simply said: “The IOC has the honour of announcing that the first Summer Youth Olympic Games in 2010 are awarded to the city of Singapore.”

With that, more than 5,000 people who had gathered at the Padang for the announcement, as well as countless others glued to television sets across the island, threw up a resounding cheer.

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, called on to deliver a celebratory speech, had to wait a while for the cheers to die down before saying: “I need hardly say how happy we all are.”

A smiling Mr Lee, with a miniature Singapore flag clutched in one hand, hailed the win as a “great honour and privilege for Singapore and every Singaporean”.

“For the first time, the Olympic flame will be in South-east Asia, and in Singapore,” he said. “We will be the focus of a new era of sports development for Singapore, for South-east Asia, and for the Olympic movement.”

He praised the national effort to land the Games — both young and old, from schoolchildren to taxi drivers, were involved, including one 68-year-old cabby who wrote letters to all IOC members telling them why Singapore deserved to be host.

As the PM ended his speech, the party fired up anew. It had begun at 4pm but quietened as tensions rose with the clock ticking closer to the magic hour of 7pm.

Amid a backdrop of a City Hall bathed in yellow, purple and red lights, revellers began dancing, singing and hugging each other, flashing the “V for Victory” symbol.

Ms Cindy Chin, 20, a Singapore Management University undergraduate, summed up the feelings of the assembled throng when she said: “This is a historic moment. Some of us are having our exams tomorrow, including me, but this is more important. I wanted to let everyone see that Singapore deserves to host the games.”

The content to play host had come down to Singapore or Moscow. According to the Associated Press, IOC members voted 53-44 in the Republic’s favour.

What clinched it was its innovative Games concept, which included a compact venue plan and a comprehensive Olympic education programme.

Mr Rogge also said he thought the prevailing sentiment among IOC members was that the event should go to a “new city that has not organised a Games”.

He added: “Singapore has put together a very exciting project.”

Expressing confidence in the Singapore team, he added: “I have no doubt that their professionalism and enthusiasm will be instrumental in the staging of a successful Youth Olympic Games.”

Yesterday’s announcement culminated in a sensational turnaround for a bid that started slowly nine months ago.

Singaporeans were initially tepid about the bid, but galvanised around it when the country emerged as a front-runner.

The win caps a series of sporting coups for Singapore: It will stage the world’s first Formula One night race in September, as well as be a stopover port for the Volvo Ocean Race in January next year.

Now, as Mr Lee said last night, the countdown to the Games’ opening on Aug 14, 2010 begins.

“We have 2½ years to prepare for the Youth Olympic Games. It’s going to be challenging, but it’s going to be full of excitement and achievements.”

carl@sph.com.sg

Photo: Reuters

JUBILATION: Cheers in the Padang for Singapore’s success, which will bring 3,200 teenage athletes to compete here.