Dream of conquering Everest still alive

By MIRANDA YEO

THREE climbers spoke of their relief and disappointment yesterday after their bid to become the third Singapore team to scale Mount Everest was cut short by an avalanche triggered by the Nepalese earthquake.

Aluminaid Team Singapore Everest were scheduled to depart from Everest base camp on April 25 – the day of the earthquake – on the third rotation of their climb. But they had fortuitously postponed it by one day.

The team had planned four rotations to acclimatise and the fourth rotation would have seen them attempt to climb from base camp to the 8,848m summit.

Team co-leader, Ms Yusrina Yaakob, a teacher, said: “Had we departed just one day earlier, we would likely have been caught in a much more dangerous situation halfway through our climb, higher up in the mountains.”

The team immediately sought shelter in a tent when the avalanche hit, before abandoning their attempt. They arrived back in Singapore on May 4.

The 28-year-old said they had initially wanted to continue with the climb. But after seeing the damage to the campsite the next day they changed their minds.

“Some climbers did not survive and for those who did, the only belongings they had left were probably what they were wearing at the time of the disaster,” she said.

“We realised how lucky we were to have survived the wrath of an avalanche.”

Further announcements that the route was unstable for climbing confirmed the group’s decision to return home to their worried families.

For fellow team member, Mr Ismail Latiff, 36, a Singapore Civil Defence Force (SCDF) officer who has been to Malaysia and Indonesia for disaster relief work, it was the first time he was himself caught in a disaster.

“My immediate response was to account for fellow climbers at base camp and to provide first aid to treat the wounded,” he said. He added, however, that the Nepali operators did not allow them to take part in search and rescue operations due to safety concerns.

He and his brother Zulkifli Latiff, 42, also an SCDF officer, were caught in the avalanche with Ms Yaakob.

Another member, Mr Seumas Yeo, 26, an economics graduate, had been evacuated to Kathmandu earlier for an unrelated injury. He was recovering from surgery in Kathmandu when disaster struck.

“I remember trying frantically to find my walking stick and passport and huddling on the floor praying that the ceiling would not collapse.” He was flown back to Singapore on April 29.

A fifth member – the team’s other co-leader, Mr Muhammad Hilwan Mohamed Idrus, 29 had suffered a minor stroke in an earlier expedition and stayed in Singapore.

The team had been preparing for the mission since 2010 by climbing stairs three times a week and gym training in a simulated low-oxygen environment.

“We are disappointed that we cannot celebrate SG50 from the summit of Mount Everest but we feel lucky to be alive,” Ms Yusri­na said.

The avalanche on Mount Everest claimed at least 19 lives. The 7.8-magnitude earthquake is known to have killed more than 7,900 people and left nearly 18,000 injured.

The team announced, at a press conference at Singapore Management University yesterday, that they will be donating their team fund to rescue efforts in Nepal and working with their title sponsor – medical device company Aluminaid – to channel funds to relief efforts.

Ms Yusrina said that while the team had decided to focus on their personal lives for the time being, they still dream of conquering Everest in the future.

“Everest will always be there and our dream is still alive.”

miranday@sph.com.sg