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## Enchanting Torch Lighting Ceremony Marks 10 Days To Go Until Ashgabat 2017 Opens

08 September, 2017 (15:25)

There was excitement in the air as thousands of people in Mary took part in a significant milestone, the torch lighting ceremony, as Turkmenistan continues its countdown to the opening of the Ashgabat 2017 5th Asian Indoor and Martial Arts Games, the biggest multi-sport event that Central Asia has ever hosted.

The torch was lit in a cultural extravaganza in the Karakum Desert about 30 kilometres outside of Mary, an oasis city on the former Silk Route at one of the biggest gas reserves in the world. The splendid ceremony was held in a lively wedding-style atmosphere rich in Turkmen culture.

More than 4000 Mary residents including singers, dancers, athletes and elders took part in the festivities. The ceremony, a walkabout through Turkmenistan's way of life, showed snapshots of the country's long history as it prepares to welcome the world to Ashgabat 2017.

Displayed along the route was artwork, a variety of handmade items including jewellery and clothing depicting the life and traditions in the region and displays of the 21 sports that will be held at the Games. There were yurts for as far as the eye could see for this final landmark event ahead of the 17 September opening.

The ceremony was based around the historical figure Oguz Han, one of the founders of the Turkmen state. The lighting of the torch took on a fairytale feel as a horseman shot an arrow in the sky, it was set alight by the rays of the sun which started a fire when it landed. The torch was then lit by those flames.

Also during the ceremony, President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov, who appeared live via a two-way video link from Ashgabat where he was welcoming the Turkmen athletes to the Athletes Village, gave his blessing to the opening of the Games.

The crowds at both events broke into cheers and applause, as the esteemed President said the country was ready to give the more than 6000 athletes and officials from 65 delegations in Asia and Oceania a very warm Turkmen welcome when they start to arrive for the Games in the coming days.

Dayanch Gulgeldiyev, the Chairman of the 5th AIMAG Executive Committee, also gave his nod to the landmark occasion.

“It’s been a wonderful day,” he said. “A day that sets us up perfectly for the final countdown towards the Opening Ceremony in less the 10 days time. We are ready to welcome the world.”

Following the lighting of the torch, the traditional Turkmen Happiness Dance broke out to the delight of the crowd. More traditional dancing ensued including performances of the white-bearded old men and the Grandmother who lights incense and the Grandmother who throws popcorn.

The excitement of staging Ashgabat 2017 has been growing ever since Mary hosted the ‘100 Days to Go’ celebrations in June.

Alamurat, a grandson of Oguz Han, was overwhelmed at the joyous occasion. “Ten days left,” he said. “But we’ve been preparing for this for a whole year. I’m very excited. Thanks to our President.”

As the ceremony came to a close, the horsemen rode off into the desert as the torch makes its journey to the capital for the Opening Ceremony on 17 September.

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