

COMMENT**National flag-bearers**

NEW STRAITS TIMES: *MAS crew deserve to know that the people are behind them*

SHOULD a Malaysia Airlines (MAS) crew member be Malaysia's flag-bearer at the Commonwealth Games opening ceremony tomorrow? This idea by two friends, literary commentator Umapagan Ampikaipakan and foreign policy and security senior analyst Shahrizan Lockman to honour and boost the spirit of the frontliners of the beleaguered airline, was picked up by local satellite news channel Astro Awani over the weekend, which ran an online poll on it. Shared by thousands over social media website Facebook, the poll garnered 90.89 per cent in favour of the proposal. The tremendous honour of flag-bearing at international sporting events has traditionally gone to a country's sportsman or sportswoman (usually a young hopeful or a distinguished veteran). So, the idea is certainly unconventional and making it a reality might set a complicated precedent. And, with only one day to go, the amount of red tape that would have to be cut to make it happen probably renders the suggestion moot.

Nevertheless, it is easy to see why the idea appealed to many people. The crash of Kuala Lumpur-bound MH17 last Thursday, coming so soon after the still unsolved disappearance of flight MH370 en route to Beijing in March, has dealt a double-body blow to the airline, and with it, the thousands-strong cabin crew. Aside from the grieving relatives and friends of the departed, it is the airline's frontliners who would most directly have felt the trauma of the two incidents. Only the most heartless of souls would not feel bad for them. The loss of friends and colleagues in such dreadful ways, the uncertainty of the airline's future and the more heavily-underlined live risk of working in the sky, cannot be good for morale. And yet, even coupled with what may be construed as inconsiderate and ill-timed criticisms on the airline, the crew have somehow managed to swallow their sadness and continue their services with a smile. So, who wouldn't want to light at least a small spark of hope and cheer in the bleak hours of this darkness? Giving them the honour of carrying the flag would be like giving a bunch of flowers to each and every crew member, conveying the message "We're with you".

Even though Malaysia has invested heavily in MAS and that investment has not brought the desired financial returns, the fact is that the people's investment goes beyond what Khazanah Nasional has poured into it. As the national carrier, MAS carries our brand, and, for better or for worse, is a source of national pride. Which is why when it performs poorly, the people feel it. And when it has been visited by such suffering as the last four months, we feel that pain, too. Taxpayers may be weary of keeping MAS afloat, but that doesn't mean we've stopped cheering for it or don't want to see it pick itself up and do well. The reverse, in fact: Our hearts bleed for them. Could there be a better way to show that we are behind them than to have their crew in front of us at the Games? Ever since its inception, MAS has carried our flag all over the world. And so, why not now?