

Milk scandal could have been avoided with Olympic ideals

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BARELY a month ago, the Beijing Olympics 2008 awed billions of people around the world with its organisation and performances despite several uncertainties. These include the many unprecedented challenges that the Olympics had to put up with, well before its glamorous opening ceremony on that auspicious 08.08.08.

Some attempted to link them to the four elements that are popular among the Chinese—wind, earth, fire and water.

They claimed that the freak snow storm that hit parts of that country and caused hundreds of thousands to be stranded from reaching their destinations was due to the wind element.

The threat of fog and pollution then was another.

The Sichuan earthquake, on the other hand, was quite clearly earth; the number of frogs "forced" out from hiding beneath the earth was seen as a not-so-good omen.

So too the interrupted Olympic torch run that was related with fire.

Water would have been implicated had the authorities failed to handle the impending flooding subsequent to the earthquake.

Such claims tell us how closely modern and traditional thinking are intertwined. To the rest of the world, however, such associations are less clear. They feel these were just natural phenomena that coincided with the Olympics. By and large, their impact on the Games went unnoticed.

At the end of it all, China almost unequivocally impressed the world that the Beijing Olympics 2008 was thus far the best in Games history.

Implicit was the recognition for the capacity to meticulously orchestrate such a slick performance and organisation, while securing the largest medal haul for itself.

The same could be said about the recent Paralympics. It was no less captivating, albeit on a different league, convincing us further of the enormous potential China has in mobilising its people to showcase some of its unique talent and creativity.

To the sceptics, there is now more reason to believe that China can be a useful member of the international community, more so as it attempts to meet world performance standards.

It was, therefore, rather shocking and disappointing that the same country that had exhibited so much promise is now marred by the toxic milk tragedy which has affected more than 53,000 children.

Melamine, an industrial chemical used in making plastics, was found not only in infant milk formula in Chinese markets, but also detected in a range of products with dairy ingredients, both locally and abroad.

Last year, melamine was reported to have been found in Chinese pet food that killed cats and dogs in the United States. This time, at least four children have died, and many more are hospitalised in serious condition, many with kidney stones. Some 80 per cent of affected children are said to be aged under 2.

Although the melamine scandal came to light just a few weeks ago, some reports allege the scam had been going on for years. In fact, the director for the United Nations' Western Pacific Regional Office of the World Health Organisation claimed to have raised concerns about the health risks but these were not reported earlier by China.

This will aggravate the waves of embarrassing scandals which in recent years have been attributed to China over a range of dangerous products, including food, drugs and toys, some leading to mass recalls.

Thus, it is not surprising that countries are scrambling to dissociate themselves from the potentially fatal incident with many opting to ban all Chinese milk products with immediate effect, regardless of brand, so as to protect their own consumers.

The question on everyone's mind is whether the tragedy could have been avoided if the whole episode had been yet another Olympic-related event, with the stakes higher and involving state pride or reputation.

To some it is about the revenge of the water element, post-Olympics. The scandal is traced to the unscrupulous practice of adulterating watered-down milk to make it appear it had a higher protein level.

The milk scandal offers valuable lessons to keep in mind in our quest for quick profits.

Wishing Muslim readers, Selamat Hari Raya Aidil Fitri.

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