



National flags of participating nations flying in Bangkok ahead of the 13 Asian Games scheduled to be inaugurated on December 6. —AFP photo

Games get ready to roll

BANGKOK, Dec 2 (AP): For a few hours Sunday, Thais will be able to cast aside worries about the lingering Asian economic crisis and revel in a spectacular cultural celebration marking the opening of the 13th Asian Games.

Several thousand people got a sneak preview of the festivities Tuesday when the final rehearsal for the ceremony was thrown open to the public at the last minute.

The rehearsal was originally supposed to be open, then last week was turned into a closed activity for what organisers said were security reasons.

"Besides, we don't want to give away the climax of the event," Somjaijuk Engrakul, chairman of the ticketing committee, told reporters about an hour before Tuesday's rehearsal began.

But stadium guards somehow slipped up and about 1,500 ordinary citizens were admitted to the crowd that was originally supposed to be limited to members of the press, foreign dignitaries, government officials and the Games organisers.

With the gates breached, the decision was made to admit all comers, and many of the stadium's 60,000 seats quickly filled up.

The lucky spectators watched 7,614 performers take part in a nearly four-hour show of lavishly-produced acts with the theme "Friendship Beyond Frontiers."

The combined budget for the opening and closing ceremonies is 70 million baht (1.94 million dollars) and that includes a large share of donated and at-cost labour.

For an overture, songs written by the country's multi-talented King Bhumibol Adulyadej, the world's longest-reigning monarch, were played by the Western-style Bangkok Symphony Orchestra along with the Fong Nam band, a kind of new wave traditional Thai ensemble.

The emphasis shifted to the visual for the next act, as hun-

dreds of performers in ancient Thai garb marched down the centre of the field to a majestic tune, followed by people-drawn chariots.

Hundreds of primary school students dressed in colorful outfits for the next two performances, celebrating both the unity of Asia and Chai-yot the cartoon elephant mascot of the Games. Elephants have long been a symbol of Thailand.

The athletes' march then followed — with performers as stand-ins — with representatives of the 41 countries taking place in what organisers bill as the last major sporting event of the 20th century.

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torch into the stadium, and Somluck Khaosai, boxer who won Thailand's first-ever Olympic gold medal in 1996 in Atlanta, will take it the last lap to light the flame.

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