

KIRIA IS SECOND TOKYO-BOUND FENCER



Kiria Tikanah Abdul Rahman is the second Singaporean fencer to qualify for the Olympics after beating Kazakhstan's Ulyana Balaganskaya 15-13 in the women's epee final at the Asia-Oceania qualifier yesterday. BH FILE PHOTO

NUS undergraduate defies the odds to beat higher-ranked fencers at Olympic qualifier; she will join teammate Berthier in Japan

Sazali Abdul Aziz

Kiria Tikanah Abdul Rahman delivered a double delight for the local fencing fraternity yesterday as she upstaged higher-ranked rivals at the Asia-Oceania Olympic Qualification Tournament in Tashkent, Uzbekistan to become the second Singaporean fencer in two days to qualify for the Tokyo Games.

The 20-year-old, who is ranked 207th in the world, entered the competition seeded sixth in a field of 14.

But the reigning SEA Games champion proved it mattered little as she beat Kazakhstan's world No. 97 Ulyana Balaganskaya 15-13 in the final of the women's epee.

The National University of Singapore undergraduate's success comes a day after teammate Amita Berthier won the women's foil competition to seal her spot at the July 23-Aug 8 Games.

Kiria's father Abdul Rahman, 55, was emotional when he spoke to *The Straits Times* over the phone.

Recounting how he felt when she scored the winning point in the

final, he said: "I was about to break down. My wife, who is overseas for work, called me and she was breaking down too.

"Every one of us is very proud of her. She's the first Olympian in our family. Praise be to God, this is all God's will."

He added that she had worked tirelessly for months to prepare for the Olympic qualifying tournament.

"Sometimes, she struggles and she complains, grumbling to herself mainly that she has projects and so on," said the freelance finance consultant.

"But she has been able to juggle. And she trained so hard, almost every day."

Despite her modest seeding, Kiria aced the poules and racked up a perfect record of six wins that included victories over Balaganskaya and third seed Hannel Abella (world No. 146) of the Philippines.

She then defeated Paria Mahrokh of Iran 15-10 in the quarter-finals, before beating Thailand's Korawan Thanee (world No. 162) 15-12 in the semi-finals.

In the final against 27-year-old

Balaganskaya, the Singaporean then held her nerve after a tit-for-tat battle to end strongly.

Only two Singaporean fencers have ever competed at the Olympics. James Wong and Ronald Tan featured in the men's foil and epee events at the 1992 Barcelona Games.

But they did not have to qualify then and earned their berths by virtue of being Singapore's top fencers.

Fencing Singapore president Juliana Seow hailed Kiria and Berthier's qualification, calling it an "amazing achievement" and describing the tournament in Tashkent as "emotional".

"We at Fencing Singapore are ecstatic to have two fencers making history for our nation at this competition," said Seow, who also credited Henry Koh, who coaches Kiria at the Blade Fencing Club.

"This is a milestone that we have worked hard for, and we will continue to build on this as we work to grow the sport of fencing in Singapore."

Two other Singaporean fencers also competed in Tashkent yesterday.

In the men's foil, Kevin Jerrold Chan placed sixth out of 17 competitors, while Jolie Lee finished joint-third among 14 fencers in the women's sabre.

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