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Barkat: Jerusalem Marathon one of the top in the world

By STEVE LINDE

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2,600 runners drawn to capital from more than 50 countries to participate in race on Friday.

Jerusalem Mayor Nir Barkat said on Thursday that the Jerusalem Marathon, which is being held on Friday, has become one of the most popular in the world.

“There is no doubt in my mind that the Jerusalem Marathon is on the short list of marathons that one has to do at least once in a lifetime,” Barkat said. “I’ll be satisfied if everyone in the world who runs marathons, which is tens of millions of people, will come at least once to Jerusalem. And I’m sure that what happens is that when people come once, they usually come more than once.”

On the rooftop of the Mamilla Hotel, which has a spectacular view of the capital, Barkat hosted a news conference for some 40 journalists who have come from a host of countries to cover the International Jerusalem Winner Marathon.

Sitting alongside the mayor were Portuguese Olympic great Carlos Lopes, South African legend Bruce Fordyce, Kenyan runners Luka Kipkemboi and Divina Jepkosgei, American “Barefoot Rick” and Tourism Minister Director-General Amir Halevy.

“I travel the world quite a lot, and when I travel the world, a lot of people say to me that Jerusalem is a place they have not been to yet, with an emphasis on yet,” Barkat said. “There are four billion people around the world, probably more, who would like to come to Jerusalem once in their lifetime to experience the holy city, the spiritual city, the most beautiful city in the world.”

Some 26,000 runners from more than 50 countries have come to participate in this year’s marathon.

“As a marathon runner myself, doing the Paris marathon, the Berlin marathon and the New York marathon, it was very clear to me when we designed our marathon in Jerusalem to see those beautiful sites create that experience of running an international marathon like in other major cities in the world, and it would scale up from year to year,” Barkat said. “But not even I, and I’m known to be an optimist, dreamed that for our fourth marathon, we’d have 26,000 runners, 10 percent of the total, from abroad.”

Barkat, who said he would run the half-marathon (21.1 km) on Friday, will be a keynote speaker at The Jerusalem Post Conference in New York on April 6.

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"The Jerusalem Marathon is a major event in our country and highlights the importance of the meaning of our city," he said.

"One of my goals is to open up Jerusalem for the benefit of the world to enjoy, to create opportunities for people to come and enjoy our city, and touch its stones. You come to Jerusalem and you can sit in a hotel overlooking the beautiful city of Jerusalem, and tomorrow morning see the streets full of different colors of runners from all over the world."

Halevy expressed appreciation to the journalists who had come from abroad, and voiced the hope that next year, the number of international participants would jump from 2,600 to 5,000.

"I really think that the Jerusalem Marathon is the best sports event we have in Israel," Halevy said. "To run in the Jerusalem Marathon while across the street is the Church of the Holy Sepulcher is something very unique, and that's why we think that the potential is huge."

Fordyce, 58, who won the South African Comrades Marathon a record nine times, eight of them consecutively, said it was "overwhelming" for him to be in Jerusalem for the first time.

"I confess that I feel a little like an impostor at this marathon, because it's only the third reason, the bronze-medal reason why I came here. The first is that I'm actually a keen birder, a bird spotter, and on Saturday I will be going to the Hula Valley to see the birds we have just waved goodbye to in South Africa on their way up," he said.

"The second is that I'm actually an archeologist and I taught archeology at Wits University in Johannesburg, and to never have been in Israel as an archeologist you cannot call yourself an archeologist. Now I can. And the third reason is to run the marathon, and I feel like an imposter because for me the marathon – this sounds very arrogant – is only half the distance that I used to run, so for me this is a sprint."

Fordyce, who still holds the world record for 50 miles, said he had a slight injury, but planned to finish the full 42.2-km marathon.

"I'm fortunate because I'm on the other side of 50 and I'm not running too well," he said. "The greatest honor you can pay me is to sit me next to this gentleman, Carlos Lopes, who was my hero when I was running in the 1980s. To sit next to a man who has an Olympic gold medal, a silver medal and whose marathon time is ten minutes faster than mine is a great thrill."

Asked if he had got any flak for coming to Israel to run in the marathon, Fordyce said he had received one letter opposing his trip, but it had not put him off.

Lopes, 67, chose not to talk to the press, but said after the press conference that it was very exciting for him to be here and he looked forward to Friday's marathon.

Roeber, 58, was very excited about his first marathon in Jerusalem, after having run 56 marathons around the world barefoot.

"The mayor mentioned touching the stones of Jerusalem," he said. "I thought that was an eloquent saying, because I touch them more than most. I will experience every one of those cobble stones tomorrow."

He said as an ordained minister, his Evangelical faith provided additional meaning to his participation in the marathon and he called it a humbling experience to be "walking in the footsteps of the age-old prophets who walked barefoot on these very steps."

In response to the question of how he managed to run marathons barefoot, he said: "Inch by inch, it's a cinch. Mile by mile, it's a trial. I'm not going to be looking way down the road, I'm going to be looking at the next inch, at the next step, and that's the way we all feel, and that's the way we all finish. Whether it's a marathon or a metaphor in life for that thing that we're doing."

The two Kenyan athletes, who are favored to come in top places, kept their statements short and to the point.

Kipkemboi, who came second in the Jerusalem Marathon last year and won the Singapore Marathon in December even though he had been fasting, said he was "very pleased to be in Jerusalem for the second time."

"This is a very tough course, because of the hills," he said. "But I train in the hills, so I like it."

Jepkosgei, who won the last Tiberias Marathon, said she too was delighted to be in Israel for the second time.

"I am very happy to be here in Jerusalem and I will do my best," she said, smiling.



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