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Page 6

Gales threaten to scupper Everest bid

Two team members have less than two days left to reach the summit before their deadline expires

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The chances of Mount Everest hopefuls Alex Harris and Anton Erasmus reaching the summit are slim unless howling winds subside.

In a live interview on Radio 5 last night, Sean Disney, speaking on a satellite telephone from the advanced base camp at 6 500m, said bad weather was scuppering the team's dream of scaling the summit.

Disney said temperatures were "way below zero", although the skies were clear. The wind was howling at about 120km/h.

He also said Mark Campbell and Robin Walshaw had begun making their way down from the north col which, at between 7 000 and 8 000m, was becoming increasingly treacherous with the snow being blown off the sides.

"We expect them to arrive later

this evening," he said last night, adding that Harris and Erasmus were going to wait at the north col. "They've got what it takes, it's just the grim weather conditions which stand in their way," he said.

Disney mapped out what the pair had to do before reaching the summit: It would take between six and 10 hours to get to Camp Five, which they still have to set up. After resting, Harris and Erasmus would climb for at least six hours to establish Camp Six, and the next day they would attempt the summit, said Disney.

The last stretch to the summit was expected to take at least 13 hours.

Disney said the climbers were forging ahead with their daunting task despite two misfortunes.

The first was an avalanche which broke at least 50m of fixed rope they were using to secure themselves. The other mishap

saw them lose one of the portable stoves used for warmth at night.

Harris (25) and Erasmus (27) have less than two days to reach the top before their deadline to get off the mountain expires at the end of the week.

Photographer Sean Wisedale is hoping to film their success at Everest's summit.

Walshaw's girlfriend Natalie Jensen said that when Robin spoke to her yesterday, he described the effect of the wind as "like being hit with buckshot" because the team were hit by particles of ice whipped up by the gale.

"They are in good spirits and keen to give the mountain their best shot, but Anton is very tired, and Robin and Sean are both at base camp where they are on antibiotics; one for a sinus infection and the other for tonsillitis."

It was vital to descend before the passes were snowed in, and landslides were another hazard.