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Langkawi-cycling

LE TOUR DE LANGKAWI KICKS OFF TOMORROW

By: Asan Ahmad

LANGKAWI, Feb 28 (Bernama) -- After months of preparation, Le Tour de Langkawi gets underway tomorrow with a promise to place the island resort on the world cycling map.

It has attracted a world-class field and more countries than any event of its kind outside the World Championship and Olympic Games.

Modelled after Le Tour de France, the world's most prestigious cycling event, Le Tour de Langkawi offers a RM1 million winners' purse, the biggest in Asia and among the top four in the world.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, the patron of the event, will flag off the nine-stage 1,400km race which will take riders through every state in the peninsula.

It starts with a circuit race here before proceeding to Kangar, Alor Setar, Georgetown, Ipoh, Kuala Lumpur, Melaka, Johor Baharu, Kuantan, Kuala Terengganu, Kota Baharu and back to Langkawi.

A total of 138 cyclists from 21 countries will sweat it out over ten days to claim the top spot.

They are Malaysia, Australia, Canada, China, Denmark, the Netherlands, Great Britain, Indonesia, Ireland, Japan, New Zealand, the Philippines, Germany, Republic of Slovakia, South Africa, Switzerland, Thailand, Ukraine, the United States and France.

Malaysia are fielding three teams comprising the elite, youth and development squads.

Switzerland, renowned for their "king of the mountain" riders, and France with their consistent performers are among the favourites to win the tour.

Some riders began arriving four days ago to adapt to the weather conditions.

Swiss team manager Wolfram Linder, who described the route for the tour as among the best in the world, said they did not have much problems with the weather.

"Everything seems fine and there is nothing to stop us from putting up the best throughout the race," he said.

Linder however would rather wear the underdogs tag.

He picked Australia, Canada, France and New Zealand as strong contenders with their array of world-class cyclists.

Malaysia, weakened by the absence of Edwin Ng who was injured in an accident in training, are not expecting much from the team.

Chief coach Ng Joo Ngan said the race would be a useful exposure for the local riders and also provided them a good opportunity to gauge their world standing.

"The cyclists are doing fine and, of course, we have the target to win and anything can happen during the race," he said.

Malaysia A comprises Tsen Seong Hoong, Nor Effendy Rosli, Suhaimi Keton, Shahrulneza Razali, M. Kumaresan and Azizan Manap while the B team are Wong Ah Thiam, Zambri Ayub, Mahazir Hamad, Hassan Jamaluddin, Abd Rahman Faizul and Mazlen Syed Husaini.

Razak Halim, Azman Ramli, Wilson Tan, Hafzan Esa, Zakaria Hassan and Rozimi Zamun make up the C team.

Meanwhile, Langkawi town was surprisingly devoid of the "competition atmosphere", even on the eve of the race.

There were no banners, bunting or flyers to announce the event and some

locals were unaware that they are playing host to some of the finest riders in the world.

Some residents seemed surprised at the sight of so many "mat salleh" with their bikes.

"If they are tourists, how come they have their own bicycles?" said a middle-aged woman drinks seller of this island, a leading tourist destination in the country. -- Bernama

AHA YBY