

23 SEP 1996

Mahathir-Formula

MALAYSIA JOINS WORLD FORMULA ONE CAR RACING CIRCUIT

By: Syed Jamil Jaafar

LISBON, Sept 23 (Bernama) -- It's confirmed. Formula one car racing -- the ultimate in motorsport -- will make its debut in Malaysia in 1999.

Formula One Constructors' Association (FOCA) president Bernie Ecclestone has agreed to Malaysia joining the world circuit and having its inaugural grand prix three years from now.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad who was here to watch the Grande Premio de Portugal F1 GP over the weekend told Malaysian journalists Ecclestone had met him to convey FOCA's agreement.

FOCA is the supreme body of formula one racing -- it negotiates with race organisers and handles all logistic and commercial affairs, including the all important television coverage rights.

Dr Mahathir said a 400 hectare area near the Kuala Lumpur International Airport (KLIA) in Sepang had been set aside for the construction of Malaysia's formula one race track.

Malaysia Airports Berhad is undertaking the project through a subsidiary company, Bersama Raya.

Details about the project are unavailable but it is estimated that it involves an investment of RM150 million. German consultants are to be engaged to help build the 5.6 km circuit according to international specifications.

Explaining the rationale for the country's entry into formula one racing, Dr Mahathir said Malaysia needed to make itself better known in the world and this could be done through its participation in a sport which draws a TV audience of more than 300 million each time.

"There are 16 formula one races in a year, which means a TV audience of billions," he said.

Dr Mahathir said Malaysia was surrounded by neighbours such as Indonesia, Thailand and Singapore which are well-known.

However, Malaysia was quite unknown and there have been occasions when letters addressed to Malaysia were delivered to Malawi in Africa.

Some people had also asked whether Malaysia was in China or somewhere near Singapore.

"We feel that we are a country in our own right and we should be known. One way to make ourselves known is through publicity ... formula one racing offers this," he said.

Dr Mahathir said formula one racing involved sophisticated engineering, especially in the manufacture of the car engine, which could be also be tapped for commercial production.

He said that although the national car Proton now had 80 per cent local content, Malaysia had yet to acquire the technology to design, manufacture or test car engines.

"Through our involvement in formula one racing, there will be an opportunity for us to learn," he said.

Dr Mahathir said that at the Estoril track in Lisbon he had had the opportunity to see how engine performance is monitored on computers through signals transmitted by radio while a car is speeding at 200 kph on the circuit.

Proton could consider using this technology while another opportunity offered by formula one racing is for Petronas to develop a lubricant which is accepted for use in formula one cars.

"This will be a tremendous boost to Petronas' credibility in lubricant

production," he said.

On the possibility of Malaysia producing a formula one car, Dr Mahathir said this was something to think about.

"We cannot say that we will not do this or that. Whenever there is an opportunity to learn something, we should take that opportunity. We cannot always depend on others for technology. If possible we should develop our own technology," he said.

"May be there will be costs involved but then, when we buy technology from others there are also costs involved."

Dr Mahathir is confident that Malaysians would support formula one racing as evidenced by the huge crowds that thronged the Shah Alam circuit which held smaller GPs in the past.

Petronas is the technical sponsor of the Red Bull Sauber Ford team of Switzerland which took part in the F1 GP at Estoril on Sunday.

The team entered two cars driven by Johny Herbert of England and Heinz-Harald Frentzen of Germany. Frentzen came in seventh and Herbert eighth in the race won by Jacques Villeneuve of Canada.

Portuguese Prime Minister Antonio Guterres gave away the prizes to the winners accompanied by Dr Mahathir who was given the honour to give away the constructors' trophy. -- BERNAMA

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