

26 NOV 1996

Mahathir-F1

MALAYSIA TEAMS UP WITH STEWART-FORD FOR 1997 FORMULA ONE

KUALA LUMPUR, Nov 26 (Bernama) -- Malaysia has teamed up with the British Stewart-Ford racing team owned by former world champion Jackie Stewart for next year's Formula One World Championship, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad announced today.

This is the first time a government is directly involved in a world motor sport at its highest level, he told a packed news conference at his office here.

The one-year sponsorship will help project Malaysia's image internationally and make it better known all over the world, he said.

The media had turned up in full force at the news conference amid speculation the Prime Minister might announce a Cabinet reshuffle.

Dr Mahathir did not reveal the cost of the sponsorship deal but described it as an "investment" in view of the tremendous exposure to be gained from television coverage of F-1 racing which attracts an annual television audience of 6.1 billion viewers.

"There are some people who think Malaysia is in China and even in Africa because Malawi is there. There are also people who say Malaysia is near Singapore. We want to hear Singapore is near Malaysia," he added.

The "Visit Malaysia" emblem and the Malaysian flag will be featured prominently on the front and rear of two Stewart-Ford cars that will enter the next season starting with the Australian Grand Prix in Melbourne in March.

"I hope the team will win many races and, more importantly, Visit Malaysia will be visible," said the Prime Minister.

With the government's partnership with Stewart-Ford and Petronas sponsoring the Swiss Sauber team, there will now be two Malaysian entries in the world series next season.

The national oil corporation entered into a five-year contract with Sauber this year.

The government's sponsorship of an F-1 team will surely boost Malaysia's plans to hold its own Grand Prix in 1999. 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.

Dr Mahathir said the 5.6km circuit could be used earlier for other racing competitions such as Formula Three and stock car championships.

The Prime Minister had attended the Portuguese Grand Prix in September and met racing mogul Bernie Ecclestone, president of Formula One Constructors Association (FOCA), who agreed to Malaysia joining the world circuit and having its inaugural grand prix in three years time.

Dr Mahathir said apart from the publicity, the F-1 partnership will also be an opportunity for Malaysians to acquire more knowledge of the automotive industry because Malaysian engineers will be working alongside the Stewart-Ford team to learn how to develop and design race car engines.

Stewart, 57, who was also present at the news conference, said Dr Mahathir's commitment to automotive high technology and the recent acquisition of British car manufacturer, Lotus, by Malaysia's Proton was "quite revolutionary" in the country's move into the global industry.

Asked on the cost of maintaining an F-1 team, the three-time world champion said it would be in the region of 20 million pound sterling (RM80 million) a year to be fully competitive.

Stewart, who is executive chairman of Stewart Grand Prix, signed a

memorandum of understanding for the sponsorship contract with Culture, Arts and Tourism Ministry Secretary-General Datuk Ismail Adam.

Also present was Culture, Arts and Tourism Minister Datuk Sabbaruddin Chik and Sri Inderajaya (Asia Pacific) Sdn Bhd chairman Tan Sri A.P. Arumugam who mooted the idea of Formula Three racing in Malaysia.

Arumugam sponsored the "Visit Malaysia" emblem for the Paul Stewart racing team, owned by Stewart's son, for the current Formula Three season and the team won two British championships and secured a victory at the Macau GP in Hong Kong two weeks ago.

The Stewart-Ford cars will be driven by Jan Magnussen of Denmark and Rubens Barrichello of Brazil in next year's world series which will feature 17 Grand Prix races. -- BERNAMA

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