

10 APR 1998

Racing-Formula One

MALAYSIA MAY HOST 1999 OPENING LEG OF FORMULA ONE

By: Arul Rajoo

PETALING JAYA, April 10 (Bernama) -- Malaysia is moving closer to hosting the Formula One car racing next year, with the possibility of holding the opening leg in March at the Sepang Circuit.

Formula One Constructors' Association (FOCA) president, Bernie Ecclestone, in a meeting with top Malaysia Airports Berhad officials in London last month, has indicated that Malaysia will host the Formula One race early next year.

Malaysia Airports' Corporate Finance Manager, Hussin Mohd Ali confirmed here today that Ecclestone was keen on having Malaysia as the opening leg of the 1999 season but it would only be finalised in July.

"Since negotiations are underway on the terms and conditions, Ecclestone told our top officials that FOCA will finalise the 1999 calendar in July and we will know our status then," he said after a cheque presentation ceremony for the Malaysian Motorcycle Grand Prix in Johor on April 19.

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.

Hussin said Ecclestone felt that having an opening leg in Malaysia would boost and give bigger milieage for Malaysia and the Formula One race as the Sepang Circuit would be one of the best circuits in the world.

In September 1996, Ecclestone had agreed to Malaysia joining the world circuit in 1999 when he met Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad who was in Lisbon to watch the Portugal Formula One race.

Hussin, who is also the Event Director for the Malaysian Grand Prix, said Malaysia was on the right track as the construction of the RM286 million Sepang Circuit near the Kuala Lumpur International Airport was going on according to schedule.

"The work is 40 percent ready and the contractor must deliver it by October. They are working round the clock...we hope to lay the bitumens in June," said Hussin who scoffed off rumours that Malaysia was having problem completing the circuit due to the economic slowdown.

Malaysia Airports is undertaking the circuit project while Malaysian firm Iktisas Engineers Sdn Bhd and well-known German race circuit expert Tilke Ingenieure Fur Umwelttechnik are the joint consultants.

Apart from Formula One racing, the 5.6km long track would be used for other international and domestic motor sport events, including the Malaysian Grand Prix.

"As the Formula One is scheduled in March, we will move the motorcycle grand prix to the later part of the year," he said.

Hussin said a local company, which is already involved in Formula One, is currently holding talks with GISS, the marketing company for the race, to become the title sponsor for the Malaysian leg.

"I think the deal will be signed by end of this month. Several parties have also shown interest to organise races there," said Hussin.

For the moment, Hussin said Malaysia Airports would manage the circuit through its subsidiaries while any decision to privatise it would depend on the management.

Hussin said Federation of International Motorcycle officials, who are flying down for the grand prix in Johor, are scheduled to visit the construction side in Sepang on Wednesday. -- BERNAMA

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