

22/07/1998

Sepang sure to get F-1 date

Harris Taib

IT looks almost certain that the World Formula One motor racing championship will come to Malaysia next year.

But it will only be official on July 29, when the International Automobile Federation's World Motorsport Council meets.

China, South Korea and South Africa are also bidding to host motorsport's biggest event in 1999.

FIA have made it very clear that for the championship to be accepted globally, Formula One must diversify into Asia and the Pacific.

But will the current economic downturn in Asia hinder their plans?

"It has not had any effect yet. So far, no one has decided not to go ahead with any projects that have already been agreed," said FIA president Max Mosley in an interview at the Australian Grand Prix on March 5 this year.

"However, if a Government wishes the event to take place, the cost of staging a Grand Prix is small compared to the national Gross Domestic Product and unlikely to be a problem."

Mosley added: "I believe I am right in saying that for 1999, races are being planned for China, Malaysia and Korea, but not Indonesia."

In the interview, he said contracts were already in place for races in the three countries. This corroborates with the signing of a five-year contract to stage the event in Malaysia sealed between the organiser Malaysia Airports Berhad and the Formula One Constructors' Association.

Even Foca president Bernie Ecclestone has indicated Malaysia would host a Formula One race in early 1999.

Mosley had specifically mentioned China's Zhuhai circuit ahead of one or two South-East Asian races, but hinted that next year's calendar may be radically different. Last week, he even suggested that the number of races may be expanded from 16 to 20 for next season, provided 70 per cent of the competing teams agreed.

The teams had earlier felt 16 races were sufficient to keep costs low, but Mosley suggested a restriction on extensive testing to make way for more Grands Prix.

Another sign which points to a Grand Prix in Malaysia is the decision on June 16 by the World Motorsport Council to appoint two new promoters of Formula One races outside Europe.

The only Grands Prix held outside Europe previously were in Japan and Australia.

Happen or not, it warranted Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad to visit the site of the RM300 million Sepang racing circuit last Monday.

Dr Mahathir said work was progressing well and the circuit was scheduled to be completed in October.

Built on a 900-hectare plot within the vicinity of the newly-opened Kuala Lumpur International Airport, the Sepang circuit will be able to cater to 130,000 spectators, and is fitted with state-of-the-art facilities.

(END)