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Sepang all set for the big One

Tony Emmanuel

PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad yesterday flagged off the first event at the newly-opened the Sepang International Circuit and gave it the thumbs up.

"Compared to some of the international race tracks, I am pleased to say some of them are nowhere near to our facility," he told a Press conference.

Sepang will be the first racing circuit in Southeast Asia, and only the second Asian nation after Japan, to host a leg of next year's World Formula One Championship, scheduled for Oct 17.

Dr Mahathir earlier signed a commemorative plaque recording the Proton International 300Km Merdeka Race as the first official event at the circuit.

Dr Mahathir expressed satisfaction with the 5.6km circuit and its lavish facilities. Officials from the International Automobile Federation (FIA) who recently visited the circuit were also impressed.

Also present yesterday were Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohamad Ali, Culture, Arts and Tourism Minister Datuk Sabbaruddin Chik, Deputy Transport Minister Datuk Wira Mohamad Ali Rustam, DRB-Hicom chairman Tan Sri Salleh Sulong, Malaysia Airports Berhad chairman Tan Sri Basir Ismail and Proton chief executive officer Tengku Datuk Mahaleel Tengku Ariff.

Replying to whether the efforts into constructing the circuit were justified, Dr Mahathir said it would go a long way into putting Malaysia prominently on the map.

"We (Malaysia) are an unknown country and with the World Formula One Championship being held here next October, we hope to be better known."

Dr Mahathir first announced plans of Malaysia hosting a round of the championship in 1996 when he visited the Portuguese Grand Prix held at the Estoril Circuit.

Malaysia Airports Berhad who own the circuit, took slightly over a year to build the circuit.

Spreading over a 240ha plot, the RM286 million circuit will be managed by their subsidiary, Sepang International Circuit (SIC).

Among the mammoth structures include a double-frontage grandstand stretching almost a kilometre long, capable of accommodating 30,000 people. Another 100,000 spectators can watch from the natural stands (hillslopes) which lookdown on the 16-turn racing track.

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