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#### A boost for Silverstone 4x4

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THE Silverstone Asian 4x4 Rally Championship is well on the way to becoming a top class event after the International Automobile Federation (FIA) gave the organisers the nod for running the fourth edition on Aug 6-15.

Getting an FIA sanction for 1999 has brought the championship a step closer to be included in the international body's annual calendar for the World Cup Cross-Country Rallies where it is hoped that the event will eventually propel itself into the same stature as the famous Paris-Dakar route.

"It's not going to be easy getting the championship to be included in the World Cup series as we have been trying for many years," said Automobile Association of Malaysia's (AAM) chairman Tunku Mudzaffar Mustafa at the launching ceremony in Kuala Lumpur yesterday.

"There's a lot that needs to be done on the organizational front. FIA observers will report on how the overall aspect of the race was run based on his personal observations and feedback from participants.

"If we succeed, the next step is to get the Asian Rally to be the pre-qualifying round for the world event.

"It may take a while and there's a lot of hard work to be done before we can realise this target."

The annual event, which covered Malaysia and Thailand in the last three editions, has been extended to include Laos as the race will finish in the capital city Vientiane on Aug 15.

Silverstone chairman Tan Sri Jen (R) Zain Hashim said: "The race will cover three countries - Malaysia, Thailand and Laos over a total distance of 4,000 kilometres, making the event the longest 4X4 cross-country rally in Asia.

"We hope that the race will be able to reach China by 2000 in line with our patron's objective, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad."

About 60 entries have been received from Japan, Taiwan, Thailand, Hong Kong, Australia, New Zealand and Malaysia.

For the first time this year, the organisers are awarding a total of 200,000 baht (about RM20,000) for the top five winners.

Zain is hoping for more competitors from Peninsular Malaysia to sign up for the race since the only Malaysian entries received so far are from East Malaysia.

Leading the national charge are 1996 and 1997 champions Kok Tsin Yee and Zainal Abidin Sablee from Sabah.

(END)