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Dr Mahathir welcomes F1 drivers to Malaysia

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KUALA LUMPUR, Thurs. - In grand style, the Formula One drivers participating in the Petronas Malaysian Grand Prix were officially welcomed to Malaysia tonight.

A formal dinner was hosted by Sepang International Circuit Sdn Bhd - the manager of the F1 circuit - at the Mandarin Oriental Hotel.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad was guest-of-honour at the dinner attended by 800 people, including International Automobile Federation officials, team members and Cabinet ministers.

Dr Mahathir, the driving force behind the staging of the inaugural Malaysian GP, welcomed the drivers and team members to the country.

He said the country was very proud to host the premier race for the first time at the end of the millennium.

"Malaysia is a new place to have the F1 race and maybe a strange place to you," he told the guests.

He said that many had not expected Malaysia to be a venue for an F1 race, but thanked Formula One Constructors' Association (Foca) president Bernie Ecclestone for his efforts in bringing the race to the country.

"We hope you'll have an enjoyable time... and hope you'll have time to see the country, which we think is beautiful.

"We hope you will share our view."

Dr Mahathir also invited the drivers and team members to extend their stay in the country after the race, jokingly saying that "the longer you stay, the better it is for us".

The drivers were then introduced one by one to guests. Among them were defending world champion Mika Hakkinen of McLaren Mercedes and Eddie Irvine and Michael Schumacher of Scuderia Ferrari.