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Mahathir-F1

DR MAHATHIR OPENS PETRONAS MALAYSIAN F1 GRAND PRIX

SEPANG, Oct 17 (Bernama) -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad today opened the inaugural Petronas Malaysian Grand Prix in a meaningful and yet another symbolic event for the nation at the new Sepang F1 Circuit, here.

Dr Mahathir, whose personal enthusiasm has been one of the driving-forces behind Malaysia's entry into the elite group of Grand Prix nations, pulled a lever to mark the occasion, as well as unveiling a replica of a F1 car in a big truck in front of an estimated 70,000 crowd.

Malaysia is the second Asian country to play host after Japan in the world championship which involves 16 legs. The country is hosting the 15th leg this year.

The Prime Minister, accompanied by Youth and Sports Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin and Sepang International Circuit (SIC) chairman Tan Sri Basir Ismail, then sat on the navigator seat of the Mercedes Benz SE 320 safety car for a two-lap ride on the 5.542-km circuit.

He was followed behind by a Mercedes Benz Silver Arrows car parade driven by two generation of drivers, the great Stirling Moss who drove in the 1950s and young future star German Nick Heidfeld, the Formula 3000 champion who will join the Prost team next year.

Dr Mahathir then toured the pit lane to see at first hand the technology, the machines and the people of Formula One. He was briefed by several team leaders including Ferrari general manager Jean Todt and Sauber Petronas team director Peter Sauber. He also had a brief chat with Sauber's two drivers Jean Alesi and Pedro Diniz.

The opening ceremony was also attended by Yang di-Pertuan Agong Sultan Salahuddin Abdul Aziz Shah, Raja Permaisuri Agong Tuanku Siti Aishah, Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah of Brunei Darussalam, Sultan of Johor, Yang di-Pertuan Besar Negeri Sembilan Tuanku Ja'afar, Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, ministers, chief ministers, Menteri Besar and corporate figures.

From vintage cars of bygone days to the FA-18 jet fighters of the Royal Malaysian Air Force (RMAF), modes of transport old and new ushered Sepang and Formula One into a new era as Malaysia's state-of-the-art facility sets new standars for world motor sports.

A track display of the Petronas motorsports parade followed by a military acrobatic motorcycle show, freefall parachutists and the spectacular flypast by the RMAF preceded the main event.

A "Colours of Malaysia" cultural show, the military band and Malaysian national flags "Jalur Gemilang" then set the scene before the pit opened and the stars of the Formula One show took centre stage for the first Petronas Malaysian Grand Prix.

-- BERNAMA

HRS AO