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Sports-F1 (News Focus)

MALAYSIA REVS UP FOR THE PENULTIMATE RACE

By: David Chelliah

KUALA LUMPUR, Oct 10 (Bernama) -- Malaysia braces itself for one of its biggest sporting challenges of the millennium with the staging of the F1 Petronas Malaysian Grand Prix at the new Sepang F1 circuit near here from Oct 15-17.

Malaysia will be put under the microscope by the Western world again as it copes with the demands of hosting the prestigious Formula One for the first time.

Being only the second Asian country after Japan to be given the honour of playing host to the elite of racing, Malaysia has put in tremendous work for the event, including building a RM286 million ultra-modern circuit that is reputedly the best in the world.

After all the meticulous planning, work is now in full swing to fine-tune the preparations at the 5.542km circuit to ensure Malaysia can be as successful as, if not better than, other F1 hosts.

The race, the penultimate leg of this year's calendar, will certainly put Malaysia on the world sporting map and give it global media mileage.

About 700 journalists and 780 television stations are expected to provide coverage for the three-day event with an estimated TV audience of 500 million across 260 countries.

The fact that Mika Hakkinen of McLaren Mercedes and Irish Eddie Irvine of Ferrari are still involved in a tussle for the championship will only add excitement to the Sepang race.

Tens of thousands of people are set to converge in Sepang over the weekend, and hotels in the area have reported full bookings while tickets for the 30,000-seat double frontage grandstand are almost sold out.

Nearly half of the total 90,000 tickets have been sold, and race promoter the Sepang International Circuit (SIC) is optimistic that ticket sales will pick up rapidly in the final days to the race.

The announcement by Ferrari that its former world champion Michael Schumacher will after all race in the final two legs of the season will certainly boost ticket sales.

Schumacher, who suffered a broken leg at the British Grand Prix on July 11 in Silverstone, had earlier ruled himself out for the rest of the season.

As the big race day draws nearer, a wave of promotional activities will keep the city abuzz with autograph sessions by the drivers, prize presentations for F1 quizzes, motor shows and other related activities.

Drivers from the 11 teams entered for the F1 have started arriving and tonnes of equipment have also been flown in by private jets.

The teams' multi-national sponsors are also busy promoting their drivers, with almost all of them scheduling media conferences before the drivers take a break on Oct 14.

The "Hard Rock Cafe" in Jalan Sultan Ismail here has jumped on the bandwagon when it decided to put a Red Bull Sauber-Petronas F1 car on top of its entrance.

The Malaysian-sponsored racing outfit did a rare preview when its two drivers -- Jean Alesi and Pedro Diniz -- gave a public demonstration at the Kuala Lumpur Twin Towers yesterday.

Visitors to the KL International Airport (KLIA) in Sepang can also catch a glimpse of the F1 cars exhibited at the departure hall, and many F1 enthusiasts have taken the opportunity to be photographed with the powerful

machines.

For the acid test on Sunday, SIC is counting on the International Motorsports Federation (FIA), the F1 guardian, to run the show.

The SIC is also organising a charity golf tournament for drivers, team crew and officials from FIA at the Saujana Golf and Country Club on Oct 18, a day after the race.

The wide range of activities has indeed heightened the spirit of "Malaysia Boleh", a battlecry that has roped in Malaysians from all walks of life to make last year's 16th Commonwealth Games here a resounding success.

To top it all, the man behind the F1 race here, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, will officially open the Petronas Malaysian Grand Prix on Sunday.

-- BERNAMA

DC YBY