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`Sepang circuit among world's best' (HL)

SEPANG, Tues. - The Sepang Formula One circuit, which was officially opened tonight, has been described by reigning world champion Mika Hakkinen of Finland as one of the best in the world.

Hakkinen, 30, who drives for Team McLaren, gave his endorsement after touring the circuit this morning.

"Some circuits lose out on excitement and appeal to the fans because of too many safety features which make the track very flat and the racing unexciting for fans and unenjoyable for the drivers.

"Sepang, however, has been able to maintain the exciting features and characteristics of the track while not compromising on safety.

"It will be spectacular for overtaking as the straights are very long, there are twists and turns and the entire course is very hilly which will make the race thrilling," he said.

The 5.542km track features 15 turns and eight straights.

Team Ferrari driver Eddie Irvine, who won the season's opening race in Melbourne last Sunday, also gave the circuit the thumbs up, describing it as "very challenging" and "fantastic."

At the opening tonight, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad described its completion as yet another example of Malaysia's ability to develop a world-class sporting facility.

Noting that history had again been created, Dr Mahathir said he was told that the race track had set the standard for all future circuits in the world.

He said some might question the rationale for building the circuit at a time like now but if they were to consider the benefits, they would realise the fantastic opportunity it provided.

In the first place, the circuit would complement the extensive development of the area, namely the Kuala Lumpur International Airport, Cyberjaya, Putrajaya and the Multimedia Super Corridor.

The track would also complement the country's rapidly growing automotive industry.

"Research and development is an important part of the industry, and the racing as well as the circuit can become the centre of this," he said.

In fact, he said the circuit could even become a centre for motorsports development not only for the country but also for the region, adding that it was cheaper for the foreign teams to base themselves in Malaysia.

Another factor to be considered was tourism as the attention of some two billion people from over 200 countries would be focused on Malaysia when the circuit hosted the second last race of the 16-leg Formula One championship on Oct 17.

Besides the advertising value, the Prime Minister expressed confidence that a sizeable number of the viewers would want to visit Malaysia, and this would certainly boost the tourism industry. "Already, I have been told that all the hotels nearby and many others in the city have been booked for the Formula One race in October," he said.

About 30,000 foreign visitors are expected for the race, along with 2,000 international technical crew and 600 foreign journalists.

The circuit is the only one in the world with a double frontage grandstand that can accommodate 30,000 spectators. There are four other stands around the circuit which can accommodate 100,000 spectators. There are also two helipads and over 18,000 parking bays.

Earlier this afternoon, Hakkinen, accompanied by Mobil Oil Malaysia Sdn Bhd's Mark DiZio, met Dr Mahathir at the Prime Minister's office.

He presented Dr Mahathir with an autographed part belonging to the car he drove when he won his first Formula One race in Jerez, Spain in 1997. He also presented a McLaren-Mercedes Formula One model car and a book on racing to the Prime Minister.

Mobil is a technical partner of Team McLaren.