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Sepang-Opening (Preview)

SEPANG F1 TRACK, WINDOW OF THE WORLD

By: David Chelliah

KUALA LUMPUR, March 7 (Bernama) -- Malaysia's international image will propel to greater heights in the new millennium with the opening of the Sepang International Circuit (SIC) on Tuesday.

The multi-million ringgit SIC, the newest and acknowledged as the best racing track in the world today signifies a new dimension for Malaysia's to be among the best service provider in motorsport.

A brave venture and foresightness to construct an ultra-modern circuit for the highly charged Formula One (F1) was mooted by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

His vision to place Malaysia in the international limelight will take another giant leap when he signals off the chequered flag to declare open the 5.542km circuit on Tuesday night.

"Malaysia has place itself in strategic position for the world to watch. The F1 track is a new landmark not only for Malaysia but also to the motorsports fraternity," said SIC Chief Executive Officer Datuk Ahmad Bakri Shabdin.

Deemed to be another success story, the track was constructed on 260 hectares of former plantation and with meticulous design, the circuit was placed in the middle of a scenic forest.

Works on the RM286 million circuit started in September 1997 and was completed late last year.

The Proton 300km Merdeka Race from Dec 11 to 13 was the first local championship to be held at the track, followed by Porsche 50th Anniversary Race on Dec 20.

Besides hosting the prestigious F1 race on Oct 18 and the World 500cc Grand Prix Motorcycle Championship on April 17, the circuit poises to make Malaysia a one-stop centre for motorsports.

Equipped with the state-of-the art technology, the SIC is the only race track in the world to provide double frontage grandstand area which can accommodate 30,000 fans.

Another 100,000 fans will be able to watch races from the sprawling Natural Stands. To add another unique point, about 50 to 70 per cent of the actual race can be watched by fans without leaving their seats.

The circuit with a width of 16 metres features 15 turns and eight straights where drivers can access top speed in excess of 300kmph. The longest straight is 927 metres at the start-finish straight.

Ahmad Bakri said the expected good turn-out by international F1 drivers and 500cc riders for the opening ceremony signifies the importance of the Sepang F1 track for the new season.

Last month, the International Road Racing Team Association (IRTA) conducted a pre-season testing by 500cc riders and another big group including world champion Michael Doohan is expected for the second testing season from March 11 to 14.

F1 world champion Mika Hakkinen is expected to arrive here tomorrow and presents the Sepang F1 logo to Dr Mahathir at the opening ceremony.

Among the F1 drivers expected are the Red Bull Sauber Petronas driver Jean Alesi and Scuderia Ferrari Marlboro ace Eddie Irvine while Doohan is also expected to be at the event.

Various programmes have been lined up for the opening ceremony and Malaysians should make an effort to visit the circuit on that day to witness another historic occasion unfolds.

"The event is something which should not be missed by Malaysians," said Ahmad Bakri.

Tickets are priced at RM5 each for the ceremony.

On the investment, he said it was worth the cause as the F1 race at the track would become a platform to promote Malaysia across the globe.

"F1 races attract huge world wide television audience, the third most watched sporting event after the World Cup football and the Olympic Games," he said.

About 30,000 foreigner visitors are expected for F1 leg here along with 2,000 international technical crew and 600 foreign journalists.

Among the programmes on the six-and-half hour opening ceremony are car exhibition, autograph and photograph session with F1 personalities, march band, laser show, stunt bikes, car and bikes parade and fireworks.

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