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Mahathir-Stewart

STEWART PAYS TRIBUTE TO DR M FOR BRINGING F1 TO M'SIA

By: Mikhail Raj Abdullah

KUALA LUMPUR, Oct 14 (Bernama) -- Former Formula One (F1) champion Jackie Stewart today paid tribute to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad for successfully bringing the F1 -- the ultimate in motorsports -- to Malaysia.

Stewart, known as The Flying Scot, said that the 1999 Petronas Malaysian Grand Prix would give greater prominence to the Asia-Pacific region as a venue for the championship which is usually held in western countries.

"During my planned 20-minute meeting with the prime minister which stretched to about one-and-a-half hours, I was struck by his wide knowledge about Formula One and enthusiasm in bringing the F1 to Malaysia," he said.

Stewart said Dr Mahathir saw a perfect opportunity for Malaysia to host the championship, garnering an international audience, at a time when the idea would hardly have crossed anybody else's mind.

The former driving ace, who is the executive chairman of the Stewart Ford grand prix team, said this during a cocktail organised by HSBC Bank Malaysia Bhd to fete the team's two drivers, Johnny Herbert and Rubens Barrichello.

The HSBC Holdings plc group is the largest non-technical group to sponsor a F1 team.

Stewart, who won the F1 three times, in 1969, 1971 and 1973, has driven in 99 Grand Prix races with 27 victories.

He was inducted into the International Motorsports hall of Fame in 1990.

Malaysia's bid to host the F1 began with Petronas's sponsorship of the Swiss F1 Sauber Team three years ago.

It won the bid following discussions between Dr Mahathir and Formula One Constructors' Association (FOCA) president Bernie Ecclestone in Lisbon in Portugal in September in 1996.

Thereafter, this led to Malaysia building the ultra-modern RM286 million 5.542 km Sepang circuit, reputedly the best in the world.

FOCA is the supreme body of the F1 racing -- it negotiates with race organisers and handles all logistic and commercial affairs, including the all important television coverage rights.

The F1, the penultimate leg of this year's racing calendar, would certainly put Malaysia on the world sporting map and give it global mileage.

About 700 television stations are expected to provide coverage for the three-day event beginning tomorrow which would have an estimated TV audience of 500 million across 260 countries.

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