

29 AUG 1999

Mahathir-F1

UP TO PETRONAS TO EVALUATE PARTNERSHIP WITH SAUBER, SAYS PM

SEPANG, Aug 29 (Bernama) -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today that it is up to Petronas whether or not to review its partnership with Formula One (F1) racing team Sauber.

"That is a decision that must be made by Petronas. They will evaluate it...if they want to go ahead with Sauber, that is their decision. If they want to terminate and go with another team, that will also be their decision," he told a news conference after flagging off the International 300km Merdeka Race at the Sepang F1 Circuit, here.

Dr Mahathir was asked on the possibility of the national oil corporation sponsoring another team in view of the "dismal" performance of Sauber drivers in the F1 championship.

The prime minister said he could not pre-empt Petronas on the matter as it was the company's project.

To another question, Dr Mahathir said Proton was now developing its own engine which he hoped would be in production in about three years.

"I think Proton is working on its own engine which I hope will be fully designed and produced by Malaysians.

"It will take maybe three years before you can start actual production," he said.

Dr Mahathir said Malaysia now had the capacity to design a new engine that would be suitable for Malaysian cars.

He was also asked when the Malaysian-made prototype engines developed by Petronas and Sauber Holdings would be used in Proton cars.

"That engine is basically a racing engine. It may be used in some high-end Protons but I doubt whether you can use it just for the ordinary Protons," he said.

Dr Mahathir also commended Proton engineering, describing it as "top-class" so much so that many companies were interested to form some sort of partnership with the national car manufacturer.

"Proton has made the fastest progress of any new automotive manufacturing company either in the developed or developing world...much faster than anybody else," he said.

On doubts expressed by some people over the benefits to be gained by the country's hosting the prestigious F1 race in October, Dr Mahathir said the race would be followed by some 300 million people worldwide and broadcast in more than 50 countries.

"If you were to work out how much broadcasting time would cost if you were to project Malaysia to 300 million people, you will have some idea of the value of the F1 race," he said.

The prime minister said all things Malaysian would be highlighted during the event apart from the background information on the host country.

"So in terms of tourist dollar, it will amount to a huge sum over a period of years," he said.

Dr Mahathir said he was informed that most of the seats available at the Sepang F1 Circuit had been booked by foreigners, including the most expensive ones costing some US\$4,000.

He said this would translate into a lot of tourist revenues not just for the government but also for the hotels and other industries.

Malaysia, he said, was also keen to host similar international events it thought capable of handling.

When asked when the country would produce F1 drivers, Dr Mahathir said

he did not know when this would happen and added that it was a skill which needed to be acquired.

He said aspiring F1 drivers should start with go-kart racing before moving on to other races and ultimately the F1.

"As you know, a lot of F1 drivers were former go-kart racers," he said.

On Malaysia's Alexander Yoong who was involved in a crash during the F3000 championship race in Belgium, Dr Mahathir said the incident should not stop him from going ahead in his attempt to become a F1 driver.

He also confirmed that the government intended to remove the import duty on go-karts due to the growing interest in go-kart racing.

Seventy-two Proton cars participated in the 55-lap race held in conjunction with the Merdeka Day celebration on Aug 31.

-- BERNAMA

MAM RM