

22 OCT 2000

Mahathir-F1

MAHATHIR LAUNCHES MALAYSIAN GRAND PRIX

SEPANG, Oct 22 (Bernama) -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad today opened the Second Petronas Malaysian Grand Prix, the last leg of the 2000 Formula One season, at the Sepang F1 Circuit here.

In a colourful and spectacular opening ceremony, Dr Mahathir, the prime mover in the hosting of the prestigious event in Malaysia, struck a gong mounted on a special platform near the grand stand.

Earlier, Dr Mahathir led the parade of all the 22 F1 drivers in vintage cars on a lap of the 5.543 km circuit built specifically for F1 race.

Malaysia, which hosted its inaugural Formula One race last year, is hosting the 17th leg of the grand prix.

Michael Schumacher of the Scuderia Ferrari Team has already clinched the world title while the constructor's championship will be decided here.

Dr Mahathir, accompanied by Youth and Sports Minister Datuk Hishammuddin Tun Hussein and Sepang International Circuit (SIC) chairman Tan Sri Basir Ismail also toured the pit lane to see at first hand the technology, the machines and the people of F1.

The opening ceremony was also attended by Raja Permaisuri Agong Tuanku Siti Aishah, Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, Cabinet ministers and corporate figures.

More than 1,300 people were involved in the opening ceremony, with over 700 performers taking to the tracks in a riot of colour and sound that delighted the 100,000 spectators who are mainly foreigners.

After a "Colour of Malaysia" cultural show, the military band played all the way from the Support Paddock to the Formula One grid while 200 teenagers from the Institute of Youth Centre in Dusun Tua brought colours of the world to Malaysia as they wave national and state flags and those of other Grand Prix venues.

To thrill the fans waiting for the F1 action, the Petronas Motorsports Team comprising touring cars, rally cars, 4x4s and Sprinter bikes took part in a one-lap demonstration that includes Malaysia's own World Motorcycle Grand Prix GP racer Shahrul Yuzy.

As the tension built up for the big race, the energetic crowd, bracing the humid condition, were also entertained to a stunning aerobatic artistry of five MiG-18 fighters from the Royal Malaysian Air Force (RMAF) air base in Subang.

Earlier, the 10-lap Proton Satria Gti Challenge Race was held as a supporting race.

Thousands of spectators making their way to the RM286 million circuit were also caught in a massive jam.

The practice session and qualifying session for today's race were held on Friday and Saturday. The race is expected to be televised to more than 130 countries.

-- BERNAMA

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