

17/02/2001

Dr Mahathir all the way behind rallying

Radzi Sapiee

PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad last night pledged his support to ensure that rallying in Malaysian can reach new heights.

Dr Mahathir, who hosted a dinner for the Petronas EON Racing Team (PERT) at Seri Perdana, Putrajaya last night, had earlier been asked to assume the patronship of the country's top rally outfit.

The team won the Group N title of the prestigious Asian Pacific Rally Championship (APRC) last year and are banking on this to attract sponsorship for a new project - to race in the premier Group A category of the APRC and win the overall title.

Dr Mahathir had flagged the team off before the first APRC leg in Indonesia last year and this, said the team, had spurred them to go the extra mile.

He said they did extremely well and this proved Malaysia have a world-class team.

"I did expect them to win some of the rallies but I didn't expect them to win the championship," he said.

Dr Mahathir then reminisced about the growth of the local car industry, from the birth of Proton when `people were skeptical about our cars' to the present where our cars are proven reliable, as shown by PERT's win in the APRC.

The team had used a souped-up Proton car.

Although he did not say he would be the patron, quipping that `I thought they would ask me to be the driver', he ended his speech on a bright note.

"I'll try to get the Government to back you," he said to the applause of some 200 people comprising the cream of the nation's motoring and motorsports industry people, including the rally drivers, Karamjit Singh and Allen Oh.

Earlier, EON chairman Tan Sri Salleh Sulong said they needed RM6.5 million to compete in all seven rounds of the APRC with a Group A car.

He said the cost is five times that for a Group N car because the Group A car is like the Formula One of rallying.

"Having won the Group N category twice, PERT have now set its sight on the overall category of the APRC for the year 2001 and beyond," said Salleh.

"To do this, PERT must now invest in a Group A car which incorporates the latest technology in car performance. We will then be on equal terms with the works of Group A cars from the leading motor manufacturers competing in the APRC."

(END)