

18 MAR 2001

Mahathir-GP

DR MAHATHIR LAUNCHES MALAYSIAN GRAND PRIX

SEPANG, March 18 (Bernama) -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad today opened the 3rd Petronas Malaysian Grand Prix (GP) here, the second round of the 17-leg of the 2001 World F1 Championship 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 triggering an audio effect that was heard all around the circuit.

Earlier, Dr Mahathir was driven around the 5.543km circuit by Sepang International Circuit (SIC) chairman Tan Sri Basir Ismail in an open-top vintage Mercedes-Benz.

The 22 F1 drivers were also taken around the track to salute the fans from a specially-built float, designed to reflect the high-performance aspect of the F1 car itself.

The decorative motive on the float is a "songket" design, an exquisite hand-woven silk and gold thread fabric worn by Malays on ceremonial occasions.

The opening ceremony was followed by a traditional Malay dance "Zapin" performance by some 200 local dancers.

To start the spectacular march past, the popular Petronas Motorsports team displayed their astonishing vehicle control.

The Kuala Lumpur City Hall band also made their debut in the SIC opening, followed by some 200 flag-bearers from the Dusun Tua Youth Training Centre, proudly bearing the national flag "Jalur Gemilang" (Stripes of Glory).

The other performers were the three award-winning school bands from Sekolah Alam Shah, St John's Institution and Sekolah Menengah Kepong.

The closing stages of the march past showcased the best of the Malaysian Armed Forces.

The Royal Malaysian Navy (RMN) silent drill team, whose beautifully-orchestrated precision drills thrilled everyone at the RM286 million circuit last year, repeated their feat this year.

A performance by the Royal Malaysian Armed Forces Band was followed by an aerobatic show by five FA-18D fighter planes from the Subang-based Royal Malaysian Air Force (RMAF).

The opening ceremony was also attended by the Youth and Sports Minister Datuk Hishammuddin Tun Hussein, diplomats, Cabinet ministers and corporate figures.

Malaysia, which hosted its inaugural F1 race in 1999, is hosting the second round of this year's World F1 GP season.

Michael Schumacher of the Ferrari team is leading in the drivers championship after the first round in Australia.

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

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