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Europeans confirm entry for Tour de Langkawi

THOUGH some international sports events in Malaysia have been disrupted by the September 11 terrorist attacks on the United States, the Telekom Malaysia Le Tour de Langkawi is set to go on as the 2002 cast will be led by top European professional teams.

Having developed into the highest rated race in Asia since its inception in 1996 - and besides offering the world's third biggest purse of US\$400,000 (RM1.4 million) in prize money - the Tour organisers First Cartel (M) Sdn Bhd are confident of a full turnout.

"The regular teams from Italy like Mapei, Cantina Tollo, Panaria, Mobilvetta have all indicated their eagerness to return to Malaysia next year and other than the American teams, I don't think there will be any problems with attendance," said First Cartel's executive chairman Datuk Wan Lokman Ibrahim yesterday.

"We know that Mercury are no longer a team after their problems this season, which leaves us with Saturn. We have not received any confirmation from them, but so far everything looks to be on track.

"Besides, the Prime Minister (Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad), who is the Tour's patron, has given us the go ahead, so we are very busy making preparations for another world class cycle race."

Other teams tipped to make the fray are Credit Agricole, AG2R and Bonjour from France, Selle Italia of Colombia, Germanys Gerolsteiner and Swiss outfit Phonak. The Canadian and South African national teams are also regulars in the Tour.

While First Cartel will have at least two months to finalise the Tour's cast, the Sept 11 attacks on America dented the hopes of quite a few fans this year, as the inaugural Le Mans Race of Champions and annual Cobra 10s tournament were called off.

The Tour, starting in Putrajaya on Feb 1, is among the main curtain raisers to Malaysia's international sports calendar next year, after the 2001 Rotax World Go-Kart Finals in Langkawi on January 21-27.

Reduced from 12 to 10 days to comply with the International Cycling Unions (UCI) latest 2002 regulations, the Tour will cut out Penang, Kedah, Perlis, Kelantan and Terengganu from its route. It will also be the first time that the annual event will miss the island of Langkawi in seven years.

"The new UCI criteria limits the duration of the race, so it will be quite difficult for us to complete it should the starting point be located in Langkawi," said Wan Lokman.

Of interest, only the major races in France, Italy and Spain are not affected by this new ruling. Besides next year's flag-off point in Putrajaya, Petaling Jaya and Tampin will also debut as a venue for the 2002 Tour.

Wan Lokman said the Tour will retain the participation of five Asian teams - including a mixed invitational team called the Telekom Malaysia All Star - as among 25 national and professional teams making up the field.

Currently rated 2.3 by the UCI, the Tour is in fact the highest rated road race in Asia, making it more attractive to professional riders vying to collect championship points for world ranking purposes.

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