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Sports-Minardi

MINARDI CHANGES NAME TO PROMOTE KL AS A WORLD CITY

PUTRAJAYA, Dec 8 (Bernama) -- Italian-based Formula One team Minardi has changed its name to "KL Minardi Asiatech" for the 2002 season to strengthen its link to Malaysia and promote Kuala Lumpur as a world city.

Minardi principal Paul Stoddart said the team's new image would be unveiled in Kuala Lumpur next month while its new F1 car for next season would be launched here in February.

Stoddart, together with Youth and Sports Minister Datuk Hishammuddin Tun Hussein, had a 10-minute meeting with Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad at his office here today.

At a media conference later, the Australian aviation magnate confirmed that Malaysia's first F1 driver Alex Yoong would have a full season with the team next year.

Stoddart said the team would also help Malaysia identify and develop local talents to be F1 drivers.

"We will work on a four-year programme to share equal opportunities for kids of tomorrow to see their talents in F1. Perhaps now they don't have a chance but we will have a programme to see that they are given a chance," he said.

Stoddart said a driving school for F1 potentials would be established here as the Sepang F1 Circuit has the facilities coupled with expertise derived from Japan and Europe.

On Alex, who had three races last season with Minardi, Stoddart said that he had been undergoing a special physical fitness training programme and would be more prepared to face the new season.

Dr Mahathir, in a statement, said: "This is the next stage in our strategy to promote Malaysia to the world, with Kuala Lumpur as the gateway and using motorsport as a primary vehicle."

"We have enjoyed marked success in building the awareness and image of our country through various racing-related programmes since 1995."

"Now we are turning to motorsport again to assist in direct development of inward investment by creating a platform for Malaysian companies, destinations, and events to reach potential customers around the world," Dr Mahathir said.

Hishammuddin said the meeting with Dr Mahathir was to update him on the latest happenings in Minardi and its effort to help develop motorsports and engine technology in Malaysia.

He also said they were discussing the possibility of identifying and training local drivers with potential to be F1 drivers in the future.

Saying Minardi's new image would give a tremendous boost to Malaysia, he urged local companies to come forward and buy sponsorship for their logos or trademarks to be displayed on the Minardi machine.

-- BERNAMA

DC AZZ YBY