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Minardi top brass hold hush-hush talks in KL

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EFFORTS to get Alexander Yoong a driving seat in this year's World Formula One championship season is on track after it was revealed that Sports Minister Datuk Hishammuddin Hussein met privately with European Minardi F1 team principle Paul Stoddard in Kuala Lumpur yesterday.

According to a report by F1-live.com, Stoddard, an Australian businessman involved in a UK-based aviation industry who bought Minardi earlier this year, and the team's sporting director Rupert Manwaring, will also meet Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad sometime this week.

The report said: "(Stoddard) might even have a meeting scheduled with the Prime Minister of Malaysia, who has taken a keen interest in (Yoong's) participation in Formula One.

"Minardi have had their eye on Yoong's progress for some time now and Manwaring stated several weeks ago that he believes Alex (Yoong) is ready for the giant step up into the pinnacle of motorsports."

The Automobile Association of Malaysia (AAM) also confirmed they have received and forwarded Yoong's application for a super-licence to the International Automobile Federation (FIA) and are expecting a response from the international governing body next week.

One of the requirements necessary to obtain the highly sought-after licence is that the driver must have the offer of a current contract with a Formula One team as either a test or fulltime driver.

Two weeks ago, Hishammuddin confirmed that 24-year-old Yoong received a genuine offer from Minardi, who currently have as drivers Brazilian Tarso Marques and Fernando Alonso from Spain.

For the record, an invitation issued by the Sports Ministry to inform some 28 local corporations about F1 sponsorship possibilities, indicated that Yoong could make his F1 debut at the British GP in Silverstone on July 15.

Last week, Yoong's father and former manager Hanifah Abdullah unveiled marketing packages for Minardi, each worth US\$1 million (RM3.8mil) to US\$3 million (RM11.4mil), to offer to local and international corporations.

He also said there is a minimum sponsorship amount of US\$5 million should Yoong intend to compete in F1 for the remaining rounds of this season.

While Minardi have repeatedly denied speculation that Marques' days with them are numbered, Stoddard did admit the Brazilian is on a race to race contract and can be replaced at any given time.

"Tarso is on a race-by-race deal," the report quoted Stoddard.

"If anybody comes along whom we believe will be an incredible asset to the team, then we have the right to change him."

It is believed that Stoddard's visit will discuss potential sponsorship deals, but there were no official confirmations or denials regarding Yoong's future with the outfit.