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PM: This GP an unusual race

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PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad described the 2001 Malaysian Grand Prix in Sepang yesterday as a very exciting and unusual race.

The Malaysian GP has been held here since 1999 but yesterday's was the first to be held under wet conditions and this saw several cars spinning off-track.

The wet track, caused by a brief but heavy shower during the fourth lap of the 55-lap race, also allowed the Malaysian crowd to see the legendary prowess of Ferrari's world champion Michael Schumacher and team-mate Rubens Barichello under such conditions for the first time, first hand.

Ironically, the two who started from the front row after posting the fastest lap time in Saturday's qualifying were in total control on wet tracks but spun off-track on lap three when the tarmac was still dry.

This allowed main rivals, McLaren's former world champion Mika Hakkinen and David Coulthard who started fourth and eight to go in front while the Ferraris were forced to rejoin the race at 11th and 12th place respectively.

But the Ferraris were the better cars on wet and both drivers drove superbly to finish one-two.

Dr Mahathir who was speaking at a Press conference afterwards said the drivers had a taste of real Malaysian weather for the first time.

He watched the two-hour race from the VIP tower at the end of the paddock building, which faces the starting and finishing line and he said everyone could see how the track dries up very quickly.

This condition provided extra excitement as the drivers who had earlier changed to wet tyres raced to get back on dries.

The Prime Minister was also happy with the turn-out especially as organisers Sepang International Circuit (SIC) had complained of slow ticket sales.

"I was told there are 75,000 people watching the race," he said.

SIC could only sell 36,000 tickets by Wednesday and this was reflected in the glaring low turn-out on Friday's free practice session.

The crowd was better on Saturday but still small compared to previous years' and yesterday's turn-out managed to dispell SIC's worst fear that the seats for the race proper would be grossly undersubscribed to their embarrassment.

Dr Mahathir said the figure is lower than the 88,000 last year but it was a very good turn-out considering that this year's edition is held less than six months after the last one.

In fact, the figure equalled that of the inaugural Malaysian GP in 1999.

Asked to comment on SIC's earlier decision to delay the local broadcast of the race (the decision was reversed on Saturday), the Prime Minister said there was concern that people would not come if there was a live broadcast but he thought it wasn't necessary.

"People would come anyway. Some prefer to watch the race live and some from their homes," he added.

Dr Mahathir said he also received glowing reviews from the teams regarding the circuit and the organisation of the race.

"They said Sepang is the best circuit and the event was well organised. I didn't ask them but they gave positive reviews," he said.

He said the next Malaysian GP would be held one year from now and he is sure enough enthusiasm would be built by then to make it a better success.

On the Government's efforts to increase motorsports awareness in the country, Dr Mahathir said it was not exactly the Government's task alone.

"I think people who are interested in motorsports should come up with suggestions.

"The Government is ever willing to support, encourage and probably also provide some incentives if the ideas are regarded as beneficial to the country's economy," he said.

Asked if there was a need for an inter-Government agency to spearhead promotions on motorsports he said the Culture, Arts and Tourism Ministry would be very interested to work closely with motorsports organisers and those involved in it.

"We are a very retiring kind of Government and we do not like to project ourselves too much. I think the private sector is much more competent," he said.