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Sports-Cycling (ETOM)

BATTLE OF ASIAN CHAMPIONS IN EAGLE TOUR

KUALA LUMPUR, Aug 4 (Bernama) -- The Gamuda Eagle Tour of Malaysia (ETOM) 2002 is all set to be a stage for the "Battle of Asian Champions" as 126 riders converge in Langkawi for the race scheduled from Aug 14 to 18.

The cream of Asian cycling will pit their skills in the five-day inaugural race, to be held under the patronage of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and organised by Clear Mission Sdn Bhd.

Top on the list is China's Wang Guozhang, who won the gold medal in the Asian Cycling Championships (ACC) in Bangkok three months ago. Guozhang, a regular contender in the Le Tour de Langkawi (LTdL), will spearhead China's challenge in the race.

Iran's national champion Ghader Mizbani is also gunning for the overall victory in the race after a commanding performance with Team Telekom Malaysia in this year's LTdL, according to the organisers in a statement here today.

Mizbani, who was 32nd overall in the 2002 LTdL, is known for his climbing prowess and the Gunung Raya challenge will provide him the best opportunity to win top honours in the race.

However, Mizbani is expected to face a stiff challenge from countryman Ahad Kazemi Sarai who won the silver medal in this year's ACC. Ahad has signed a contract to ride for Taiwan-based Giant Asia Racing Team, a Trade Three team and Asia's only professional team.

Ahad, who was also a member of Team Telekom Malaysia in this year's LTdL, will be aiming for some stage wins, including Stage One's time trial race and the 830-metre climb up Gunung Raya.

Mongolian top cycling star Jamsran Ulzii-Orskhikh, a rider with Dutch amateur outfit Marco Polo Team, will also be under the spotlight.

Orskhikh, the 15-time Mongolian national champion, is also known for his capabilities on the mountains and in time-trial races.

Tonton Susanto of Indonesia is also top on the favourites' list following his domination in the Asian category of this year's LTdL.

Tonton, who represented Team Telekom Malaysia, finished 15th overall beating off some of the notable European riders and won the Asian individual title for the second time.

Meanwhile, Malaysia will be banking their hopes on former SEA Games gold medallist Tsen Seong Hoong and seasoned rider Nor Effandy Rosli in the team and individual events.

Seong Hoong will wear the colours of Team KL, along with 1998 Commonwealth Games silver medallist Nor Effandy who will also be the team's main man for the race.

National rider Shahrulneeza Razali, a former SEA Games gold medallist, is also in the running for the individual crown. Shahrulneeza is the main rider for Selangor Sweet Nice Team, a mixed team who will feature three riders from Indonesia.

Malaysia will also be represented by two other teams -- Team NSC of the National Sports Council and the national team.

The Philippines will again be relying on their most experienced rider Victor Espiritu, who was 61st overall in the general classification in LTdL 2002.

-- BERNAMA

HRS HK YBY

