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Wary Americans pull out of Tour

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THOUGH the 2002 Telekom Malaysia Le Tour de Langkawi will feature the biggest number of First Division outfits this year, there won't be any American teams competing due to the Sept 11 terrorists attacks on New York and Washington.

Saturn, a Division Two team who have not missed a race since their maiden Tour in 1997, and 2000 overall champions Mercury, have both declined invitations to compete in Malaysia's annual US\$400,000 (RM1.4 million) cycle race beginning in Putrajaya on Feb 1.

"It's unfortunate that Saturn will not be part of the Tour this year because they have always emerged as good title contenders since their entry in the second year," said Tour organiser First Cartel (M) Sdn Bhd's executive chairman Datuk Wan Lokman Ibrahim in Kuala Lumpur yesterday.

"I don't know if Mercury had initially planned to come to Malaysia in light of their internal problems, but I suspect that the teams have been advised by the US government against making the trip."

Out of 15 professional teams which have been confirmed to date, five are from Italy, three from France, two Belgian outfits, and one each from Holland, Germany, Spain, Colombia and Denmark.

Of the 15, seven are grouped in Division One. Italy's Mapei-Quickstep and Lotto Adecco of Belgium, ranked World No 4 and No 5 respectively, belong to the category's elite top-10 club.

The national entries are from China, Japan, Philippines, South Africa, Canada and Malaysia.

The Tour organiser is hoping to include Telekom Malaysia All-Star, a multi-national invitational outfit, and another trade team to complete this year's 23-team cast.

"Even the Canadians were apprehensive about competing when they heard about (deposed Governor of the Autonomous Region for Muslim Mindanao) Nur Misuari coming to Malaysia," said Wan Lokman.

"But I assured them that there's nothing to worry about and that things are very peaceful here.

"The Canadians were convinced and they have agreed to come."

Recently in his New Year speech, Tour patron Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, while condemning the Sept 11 attacks, has called for closer relations with the United States.

The Tour, which ran its first race in 1996, will be reduced from 12 to 10 days this year to comply with the International Cycling Union's (UCI) latest directive.

As the Tour is ranked 2.3 by the UCI, which will accord championship points to professional riders and teams for world ranking purposes, this year's 1,310km race is in fact the highest rated cycle race in Asia.

The teams: Mapei-Quickstep, Cantina Tollo Acqua, Panaria Fiordo, Mobilvetta, Alexia Alluminio (all Italy), Credit Agricole, AG2R, Bonjour (all France), Lotto Adecco, Collstrop Palmans (both Belgium), Selle Italia (Colombia), Fakta (Denmark), Colchon Relax (Spain), Nurnberger (Germany), China, Japan, Philippines, Canada, South Africa and Malaysia.