

23 MAR 2003

Sports-F1 (Opening)

PM OFFICIATES AT MALAYSIAN F1 OPENING

SEPANG, March 23 (Bernama) -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad officiated at the opening of the fifth Petronas Malaysian F1 Grand Prix at the Sepang F1 Circuit today.

Dr Mahathir, who is on two months' leave until May 4, returned home from Brazil on Thursday to watch the F1 race, the second leg of the world championship.

He was received on arrival at the circuit by Acting Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, Petronas chairman Tan Sri Azizan Zainol Abidin, Petronas president and CEO Tan Sri Mohd Hassan Marican, Sepang International Circuit (SIC) chairman Tan Sri Basir Ismail and Youth and Sports Minister Datuk Hishammuddin Tun Hussein.

As in previous years, the opening ceremony started with cultural dance presentations of the country's various races in front of the starting grid of the 5.543km circuit.

Petronas, the title sponsor since the inaugural race in Malaysia in 1999, had earlier paraded its motorsports teams. The Petronas Sprinta team led the one-lap parade followed by the Petronas-EON Racing Team (PERT) with world champion Karamjit Singh and the Petronas 4x4 Adventure Team.

Dr Mahathir led a parade of vintage cars carrying F1 drivers, sitting in a Mercedes driven by Basir. Right behind them was the car carrying Abdullah.

Dr Mahathir, Abdullah and other VIP guests then visited the paddocks of the 10 participating teams.

Sultan Sharafuddin Idris Shah of Selangor and the Raja Muda of Selangor, Tengku Amir, also turned up for the race, which is telecast live by RTM.

Culture, Arts and Tourism Minister Datuk Paduka Abdul Kadir Sheikh Fadzir and Second Finance Minister Datuk Dr Jamaluddin Jarjis were among the Cabinet members present.

An hour before the race, six F/A 18 Hornet jets from the Royal Malaysian Air Force made a fly-past, much to the delight of the estimated 100,000 spectators.

Despite the hot weather, fans had started flocking to the venue since morning.

The European Minardi team also roared out their opposition to the US-led war on Iraq by displaying the "Malaysia for Peace" sticker on the right side of their car.

-- BERNAMA

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