

24/03/2003

'F1 crowd proves country a safe place'

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SEPANG, Sun. - The successful staging of the Petronas Formula One Malaysian Grand Prix, attended by some 100,000 spectators from various countries, is a testimony to how safe the country is, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today.

The Prime Minister said the race, held against the backdrop of an ongoing war in Iraq, also proved wrong the negative advisories issued by some countries recommending their nationals stay away from Malaysia and the region.

"I have been told that some cancelled their journeys here ...too bad for them."

Dr Mahathir, who is on two months' leave, was speaking to reporters after the conclusion of the fifth edition of the Malaysian Grand Prix here.

The Prime Minister said he was very happy the race ended without incident, adding people could see it was not dangerous to visit Malaysia and be in a big crowd.

"It demonstrated how safe Malaysia is. All those advisories on the presence of terrorists here have been proven false. If they are here, surely they will take advantage of the large crowd, which is made up of many foreigners including Europeans. But we can see they are safe."

Dr Mahathir was also asked to comment on the "Malaysians for Peace" stickers on the Minardi cars, despite the team being owned by Australian Paul Stoddart, with a Briton as one of its two drivers.

Britain and Australia are among the strongest supporters of the United States-led war, contributing thousands of troops to the campaign.

"That's good. (Peace) is our desire. We want the world to be in peace so that we can have races like today, attracting tourists from all over the world.

"When they are here, they can interact and get to know each other better, which is way better than war."

Dr Mahathir said motorsports could bring various benefits to Malaysia. Besides attracting tourists, he said the sport would enable local engineers to learn and acquire superior technology in developing racing engines.

"Sauber Petronas has given four local engineers the opportunity to learn about racing engines. From here, we will have better knowledge to produce engines for ordinary cars."

On his favourite team, Dr Mahathir quipped: "Of course I am loyal to (Sauber) Petronas, and I hope the team will improve its performance over time."

On whether he would attend future Malaysian Formula One races after his retirement in October, he said: "If I am free, I will come."

Asked for his happiest moment at F1 races, Dr Mahathir said it was seeing the success of the first Malaysian Grand Prix. "I was worried then that there would not be any spectators.

"You have to have at least 30,000 to stage a good race because the whole world is watching.

"So our ability to stage this race, which is witnessed by 350 million people, means that Malaysia is better known and becomes the choice destination for many tourists."

On the war in Iraq, the Prime Minister was asked on views that reports

on the conflict by Western media like the CNN, CNBC and BBC did not represent the true picture.

Replying that the truth would prevail, he said: "The truth will eventually come out and we will know who is telling the lies."

Some reports, like mass surrender by Iraqi units and the easy capture of cities and towns, have been branded as US propaganda.

Dr Mahathir said Malaysia had expressed concern on the so-called precision weapons used by the US.

"From the start we said that civilians would be the victims of war ...children, women, old people who have nothing to do with the conflict.

"That's why we are against nations going to war to resolve conflicts," he said.