

Cannonball is go despite 4 deaths

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Alice Springs.

Darwin .

Organisers of the Northern Territory Cannonball Run said last night that the race would continue despite yesterday's high speed crash which killed four people and claims that the race should never have gone ahead.

Former racing driver Mr Allan Moffat, the organiser of the 3700km event named after the 1981 Burt Reynolds movie, said that all necessary and effective safety provisions were in place and that "99 per cent of competitors had done the right thing". He announced the go-ahead after consulting with the Northern Territory Chief Minister, Mr Perron.

Mr Perron, who expressed sympathy with the relatives of those killed and to race organisers, said: "Safety considerations were at the top of the agenda from day one of the planning for the Cannonball Run.

"There is an element of danger in any competitive sporting event from rugby to motor sports."

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But Federal Government Minister and Northern Territory Senator Bob Collins said the race, in which two Japanese competitors and two race official died, should be abandoned and not held again.

There was also criticism from the Automobile Association of the Northern Territory, which had voiced concerns before the race.

Association manager Mr Malcolm Pash said: "There will have to be a reassessment. I think you will find it will be the first and last race."

Senator Collins said he had told the Territory's Deputy Chief Minister, Mr Barry Coulter, at a meeting in February that the Government was letting "amateurs driving high-powered cars with engines bigger than their brains" on a public road on which they had never driven before.

He had also refused NT Government requests to publicly endorse the race. "They (the NT Government) can't continue to complain about the cowbo image they've got around the place ... and running Cannonball Runs at the same time," he said.

"The Chief Minister is a hot-rod enthusiast and I think on this occasion he's let his personal enthusiasm carry him away a bit."

But Mr Moffat said last night: "This is the only legal Cannonball event in the world. All the others, including those in America, have been clandestine.

"We are out in the open having dealt in the proper manner with all the authorities and put in place all the necessary safety procedures."

Yesterday's accident happened about 100kilometres south of Alice Springs. The race leader, a \$750,000 Ferrari F-40 driven by millionaire Japanese dentist Mr Akihiro Kabe and his navigator Mr Takeshi Okano, lost control when overtaking a Porsche about 9.30am.

Police superintendent Terry Ey said the car was coming out of a bend approaching a check point and slammed into two support vehicles on the side of the road. Two officials - Tim Linklater, 22, of Howard Springs, and Keith Pritchard, 31, of Palmerston, both in the Northern Territory - were killed.

It is not clear how fast the Ferrari was travelling at the time of the accident. But it did not occur during the "flying mile" section of the race in which drivers tested the speed of their cars.

The event's chief medical officer said it was almost certain that three of the men were killed instantly. Mr Okano, suffering severe head injuries, died while being treated by at the scene.

Mr Moffat said neither competitor was wearing a crash helmet and that these were never made compulsory for the Cannonball stages but were worn during the daily "flying mile" timed sections.

During Monday's timed section north of Alice Springs, Mr Kabe's Ferrari had been clocked at 285kmh putting him at the head of the 130-car field.

Just 500 metres before yesterday's control point where the accident occurred Mr Kabe had overtaken another competitor.

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Witnesses said the Ferrari appeared to slide off the road into gravel while braking, spin back onto the bitumen and then slide backwards into the official 4WD vehicles.

In the 1970s, an illegal Cannonball Run was held coast to coast in America and highlighted in the film of the same name.

The six-day event will re-start from Ayers Rock tomorrow morning and will finish in Darwin on Friday afternoon.

Competitors earn daily points in three controlled sections including the "flying mile" challenge. The road is closed to other traffic during this section
