

12 JUN 1997

Centre

A CENTRE THAT THINKS ITSELF A TECHNOLOGY FACTORY

By: Wan A. Hulaimi

LONDON, June 12 (Bernama) -- In the suburban sprawl of Hayes under the flight path of Heathrow airport, Central Research Laboratories (CRL) is miles away from the boffin image of British scientific research that is so full of ideas but not at all acquainted with commercial reality.

The new relationship that CRL has etched out with Technology Park Malaysia (TPM) promises to be a fulfilling one. Of the first words uttered by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad when he arrived here yesterday was: "I wonder why we've not heard of this (place) before when other people have been coming and made use of their research".

What they are doing at CRL, a company with excellent research pedigree founded way back in 1928, is to translate academic research into marketable ideas. It calls itself an intellectual property management company, a "technology company" and the "perpetual idea machine".

That it itself styles so is no mere boast. CRL registers 45 patents a year, three times more than its nearest rival 3M; one of its researchers is a nobel laureate for research in CAT scanning technology; BBC television service's 405-line broadcasting went on air with CRL cameras in 1936; in 1967 CRL 2001 cameras pioneered the BBC colour service; in 1973 CRL developed an innovative copy-proof magnetic tape technology, and the list goes on.

The company's boast is that CRL inventions are used by over a billion people everyday.

Dr Kenneth W.Gray, chairman and chief executive of Scipher Ltd, CRL's holding company, said emphatically: "We are very much customer driven. We are not academics."

Not too long ago this would be a surprising claim for a research centre with 27 PhD holders and one Nobel laureate, but in the current trend of bringing technology to the people for utility and profit, it ties in very well with Malaysia's 2020 vision of not only being in the leading edge of technology, but also becoming itself an industrial power.

This was an idea that suits Dr Mahathir's idea of technology to the tee. Earlier in the year he visited Professor Bhattacharyya at Warwick University's famous business centre where the forces of industry and academia form a beautiful synergy.

The one outstanding impression when Dr Salleh Ismail, CEO of Technology Park Malaysia (TPM) and two other Malaysian entrepreneurs arrived here to accompany the prime minister here yesterday was the promise of breakneck speed of delivery, mass production partnership and the sharing of technology.

Little wonder therefore that the Technology Park Malaysia Research Bhd (TPMR) is already recognised as a pioneering Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) company. The finalisation of the company -- a joint venture between TPM and CRL (with TPM taking a 51 per cent holding) -- will take place at the next Langkawi smart partnership meeting but before even reaching there Dr Salleh is proposing a name change already to extract the "Research" element from their common name to give it a more thrusting pedigree.

Reinforcing Dr Gray's words, CRI's finance director David Hulston remarked of the partnership with TPM: "It's not there to be a blue sky research attached to a university. It will be the commercialising of research."

Two projects identified for Malaysia on Wednesday were the integrated

sensor chip technology and the cableless narrowcasting (as opposed to broadcasting) of audio-video signals for specific uses such as in fire-fighting for added security on the railway, and for a myriad other niche uses.

Dr Gray said that the sensor technology alone will be worth US\$10 billion annually and that Malaysia could take up to 10 per cent share of this within a short time.

Already an order has been placed for three million Malaysian-made CO (carbon monoxide) sensor chips from the United States with a promise for more, Dr Salleh said.

Given the forecast that by the year 2000 every motorcar would be equipped with 15 sensors, there's a market worth at least US\$750 million for TPMP already added.

To carry its research project forward into new areas, TPM two weeks ago set up its venture capital department managed by former PNB staffer Shaliza Salleh.

"We have a RM10 million starting capital but eventually our budget will be increased 10-fold," she said, adding that five companies engaged in educational equipments and electronic commerce products are being assessed by her department for financing as TPM companies.

Outlining the initial flagship projects with Malaysia, Dr Brian Holcroft, CRL's joint manager in the bio and chemical instrumentation group said that the CO detectors could be produced in 12 months and the automotive sensors within 24 months before the production of other products as the market needs.

These would be in areas such as motor vibration control and medical pressure sensors.

Dr Mahathir himself expressed his own desire to see the modernisation of the Malaysian railway system which, though still handicapped by the narrow metre gauge tracks, could still benefit from the introduction of sensor chip aided high-speed tilting trains.

The objective of this TPM-CRL partnership is to develop world class products and to install a culture and process of innovation of Malaysia, said CRL's finance director David Hulton.

"It would enhance the international reputation of CPM," he said.

When he arrived at CRL yesterday morning, Dr Mahathir said that he was not sure what to expect but before leaving he made this entry in the company's visitor's book: "This is an amazingly innovative laboratory and I am truly impressed.

"I can see great things for Malaysia in this collaboration proposed between CRL and Technology Park Malaysia."

It was a vision that must have been conjured when he heard a rousing rendition of the 3rd movement of the Mahler's 9th symphony played in an experimental recording with the London Philharmonic Orchestra under the baton of Ben Zander.

The piece, produced in 3-D recording technology, was yet another in CRL's long line of innovations in audio technology. -- BERNAMA

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