

13/06/1997

Malaysia to tie up with British R&D company

Rashid Yusof in London

PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who is on two months' leave, on Wednesday visited CRL Ltd, another UK company with a wealth of technology, and said a Malaysian version of CRL would eventually be created.

For a start, a partnership is being formed between CRL, based in Hayes, near London, where Dr Mahathir spent five hours yesterday, and Technology Park Malaysia Corporation Sdn Bhd.

The partnership will start with the manufacture of two of CRL's inventions in Malaysia - integrated sensors which have a rapidly growing market, and close-circuit television on trains, which among others, provide the driver with a view of what is coming ahead.

Like CRL, the CRL-TPM tie-up will eventually develop new inventions and license them to manufacturers.

Dr Kenneth Gray, chairman and chief executive of Scipher Ltd which is CRL's parent company, said it would take some five years for the Malaysian version of CRL to be established.

Dr Mahathir who last week spent some time at the research centre of Frazer-Nash and tested its range of electric vehicles to be manufactured in Malaysia, said he was very impressed with CRL's work.

Founded in 1928, CRL's first claim to fame was through stereophonic recording developed in 1931. During World War II, it developed early warning radar system, and later the 2001 camera system when BBC went colour in 1967.

Sir Godfrey Hounsfield of the company won the Nobel Prize in 1979 for the world's first brain scanner. CRL now submits 45 patent applications a year, while sister company QED Patents Ltd manages a portfolio of 600 patents.

CRL has a professional staff of 120 including 27 with doctorates. One of its newest inventions was the inaudible "tattoo" in sound track.

Describing CRL as a multimedia company, Dr Mahathir said he was most impressed with its philosophy of doing research for the applications of others.

"We are interested in manufacturing, as our own research capability is quite limited," said Dr Mahathir.

Speaking to Malaysian reporters, Dr Mahathir said the use of sensors developed by CRL, on tilting trains in Malaysia could be considered.

He said all the tracks in Malaysia were metre-gauge and this would be retained especially when the railway line in Malaysia, Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, and southern China - to be covered by the Trans-Asia rail link from Singapore to Kunming - uses metre gauge.

"The only way we can improve the speed is by using tilting train," Dr Mahathir said. He said with the tilting train's technology improving all the time, sensors developed by the CRL might help improve the performance of the tilting train.

Dr Mahathir said Lotus, the automotive engineering company and maker of sports cars now controlled by Proton, could work with the TPM-CRL partnership.

"Lotus has been working on sensors and their applications in the automotive industry. Since we want to work together with CRL, and also since we have an automotive industry, we should try and utilise both in order to have innovations in our own automotive industry."

Dr Mahathir was also asked on development of R&D in Malaysia, on Malaysian companies buying technology, and on whether he thought there was already a culture of research and innovation in the country.

He said while Malaysia wanted to have its own innovations and R&D, "we don't have to re-invent the wheel, so to speak".

He said that there was no reason why Malaysia should not just buy the technology. "Provided of course it pays. That the cost is not so high, that will price us out of the market."

On the culture of research and innovation, the Prime Minister said: "We have done research, but Malaysians are not yet very good at making use of the results of research."

The other problem, he added, was that a lot of research in Malaysia had been more academic, which made applications not easy.

"We need to develop a culture of using new technologies, in order to produce new products. That's the culture we don't have."

Integrated sensors have a global market expected to be worth over US\$10 billion (RM25 billion) by the year 2000. And the trend is towards the use of multiple sensors in cars, from monitoring suspension, accelerators, to rotation of shafts, pressure, and chemicals.

The market for air bags alone is worth around US\$100 million, but this could rise to almost US\$2 billion.

Briefing Dr Mahathir, Gray said CRL hoped to capture 10 per cent of the world's sensor market.

The company is tentatively called TPM Research Malaysia, but TPM chief executive Dr Salleh Ismail said this was being changed as "research" did not connote making money, instead it cost money.

Within the joint venture there will be room for other players considering the range of products that CRL has to offer.

Chairman of Sapura Holdings, Tan Sri Shamsuddin Abdul Kadir; and Utusan Melayu executive chairman Tan Sri Kamarul Ariffin were among those present yesterday.

Efforts to set up the joint venture have started, with staff recruitment to begin soon.

"On Saturday, an officer from CRL will go to TPM. He will start working on Monday. Also on Monday, Sapura staff will be here to start working on another project.

"We hope we will sign the agreement very soon, we cannot be faster than that," Salleh said.

TPM will hold 51 per cent in the joint venture firm, and the rest by CRL.

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