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TENAGA IN ELECTRIC VEHICLE VENTURE WITH BRITISH FIRM

By: Wan A Hulaimi

LONDON, June 6 (Bernama) -- Tenaga Nasional Bhd is leading a Malaysian-British venture to manufacture quiet, environment-friendly electric vehicles which will give Malaysian golfers mobility on the green via electric-powered golf buggies.

This was announced by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who had earlier here today tested out the prototype electric four-wheelers and a motor-cycle on the grounds of an engineering research centre in Farnborough, about 32 miles south-west of here.

A company called POEM (Perusahaan Otomobil Elektrik Malaysia) has already been formed between Fraser-Nash Research Ltd, an engineering and electronics research company, and four Malaysian investors, i.e., Tenaga Nasional (TNB), Composite Automotive Research (CAR), Musteq Industries, and the chairman of the FIMA group of companies, Tan Sri Basir Ismail in his personal capacity.

POEM's first electric-powered golf-buggies are expected to roll out from its temporary production plant in a leased building on the TNB university campus in Bangi by the end of the year.

After test driving F-N's prototype electricity driven city car, the beach buggy, a go-kart, and a motorbike on the grounds of Mychett House, Dr Mahathir said at a short press conference that electric cars were not yet ready for the popular market but he expected eventually for POEM to "develop a market no just in Malaysia".

Dr Mahathir, who took a break from his two-month holiday to visit Frazer-Nash's headquarters, also unveiled a plaque on his arrival here to commemorate their moving into Mychett House.

Mychett House is a historic building on a 4.6 hectare (11.5-acre) site which has been, at various times, a military centre and prison home for Rudolph Hess, Adolf Hitler's deputy who flew in on his notorious mission of peace to Britain during the Second World War.

TNB's executive chairman, Datuk Dr Ahmad Tajuddin Ali, is now also the chairman of the two-month old POEM, while his SIRIM fellow alumnus, Encik Helme Hashim, has been appointed general Manager, with the latter gaining expertise in automobile manufacturing earlier in his career during a three-year stint with British Leyland on the Allegro car project.

The major equity holders of POEM, which has an initial paid-up capital of RM10 million, will be TNB and E-N with stakes totalling 40 percent and 30 percent respectively.

CAR, a company owned by former Proton general manager Datuk Nazmi Salleh and Musteq Industries will each own five percent. Both these companies will be involved in body production works for POEM once it is set in motion.

Basir would be participant in the project in his personal capacity but information on his shareholding was not available. The remaining 20 percent equity has yet to be resolved.

F-N's engineer chairman, Kamal Siddiqui, said that this was the first joint-venture that his company was getting into to produce electric vehicles. Siddiqui acquired F-N some five years ago.

In a separate joint press conference afterwards, both Tajuddin and Nadzmi said that an unnamed party will also be joining POEM as a sixth member. Tajuddin only described the company as being involved at the moment in the building of the composite body for POEM vehicles.

Tajuddin said that POEM's first production - employing 30-40 people - would be for the niche market where electricity-driven vehicles would be ideal for use in the urban environment.

After golf buggies, POEM would be the ideal transport vehicles for mail-delivery companies, airports, and for use on corporate and company campuses.

On the motorcycle project, he said "we have to refine it for mass production. For this there may be a mass market. Again we are looking at those who use the motor-cycle for fixed errands."

Tajuddin said he sees a future where electric vehicles will be widely used in the urban environment, environment, with recharging facilities provided at parking areas such as outside supermarkets and public car parks.

The charge time for these vehicles would be one hour at dedicated recharge points and approximately six hours from a domestic supply, Tajuddin said.

"The future of the electric vehicle is in battery technology and we're developing technologies to extend its range,"

He added; "Along the line, we are also assembling the go-kart to test the popularity of that. We're still finalising the prototype of the city car which the Prime Minister tested today."

He also said that POEM's city car - now called the solar baby - is expected to be in production during the course of next year at the earliest.

The city car, with a range of 120km at 70-80 km/h will be sold at the Kancil price range but with its limited range, it will complement, not compete with existing Malaysian made cars, said Tajuddin.

Being silent, pollution-free and environment friendly, POEM will not only be getting incentives from the government but also from the Earth Summit agenda 21 programme, he added.

Commenting on production costs, Datuk Nadzmi said that POEM's use of a composite body meant that its production costs would be lower compared to the production costs of conventional cars such as the Proton. -- BERNAMA

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