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Local firms must be smarter, more self-reliant, says PM

Wendy Lim

IN the current economic circumstances, Malaysian companies should be smarter and more self-reliant especially with regard to technology so as to be able to compete effectively, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad says.

This means that Malaysia should improve its home-grown technology to manufacture high quality products for the local as well as export markets, he said.

"The importation of technologies, which is often the easiest way to obtain technology, should be reduced," Dr Mahathir said when launching the Malaysian Advanced Science, Technology, Engineering and Research Centre (MASTERCentre) at the Technology Park Malaysia (TPM), near Kuala Lumpur.

The centre, a 1,400 sq m facility, houses a prototype and production department, and a robotics and flexible manufacturing system laboratory.

The laboratory, equipped with 17 robots, seven robo-machines and an automated factory set-up for training purposes, is the most advanced of its kind in the country.

The Prime Minister said through the development and manufacturing of quality products, Malaysia will be able to improve upon its current position as the world's 16th largest exporter.

Local companies should be more innovative and develop truly Malaysian products, initially by quickly absorbing foreign technologies and then progressing from mere assembly operations to full-fledged manufacturing outfits, he said.

For example, although Malaysia is the largest maker of air-conditioners in the world, they are still mostly manufactured under the brand names of multinational companies.

"The new robotics facility should therefore be used extensively in training, component and product manufacturing, research, invention and product development to improve quality and productivity.

"We must have confidence in ourselves," he said, adding that the Government will give priority to ventures geared towards the development and manufacture of Malaysian products.

Cooperation between TPM and local industries, together with other similar efforts, will help generate a growing pool of knowledge workers and transform Malaysia into a "smart production centre", Dr Mahathir added.

In the process, the dependence on expensive foreign components and precision high-technology child parts will be reduced, he said.

The Prime Minister later also launched Teknos Sdn Bhd, a joint venture between TKM and UK-based Scipher Ltd to manufacture and market Videonet transport communication systems, as well as two new tenants of the park - Netcard Corp Sdn Bhd and Polytron Resources Sdn Bhd.

Netcard is involved in information publishing, virtual retail marketing and provision of Internet access, while Polytron Resources specialises in energy-saving electronic ballast products for government offices.

Asked for his views on the weapons inspection deal clinched by UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan in Baghdad on Monday, Dr Mahathir said: "I hope that certain parties will accept what Annan did."

He was apparently referring to the US and, its strongest ally in the dispute, Britain, which had threatened to use military force to end the standoff over access for UN arms inspectors to sites suspected of holding

chemical or biological weapons.

On whether he expected the threat to attack Iraq will now be withdrawn, he said: "I think the threats will continue. This is my opinion... I may be wrong."

The same goes for the sanctions. "I hope they will be lifted... but I feel there will be excuses to continue with them."

On the Group of Seven (G-7) meeting in London at the weekend, Dr Mahathir said Malaysia would want the G-7 countries, including Japan, to do more to help Asia, "but I am not hopeful."

Analysts had slammed the meeting for its lack of concrete action and singled out Japan for not doing enough to help its neighbours out of financial straits.

Meanwhile, TPM chairman Tan Sri Dr Omar Abdul said about 100 companies have indicated interest in taking up spaces in the yet-to-be developed Phase II of the park which already plays host to 83 companies.

TPM, set up 18 months ago, will also be calling for tenders for the development of Phase III, envisaged to include bio-technology and sports medicine facilities.

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