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QUICK ECONOMY RECOVERY SEEN FOR M'SIA, SAYS FORD OFFICIAL

By: Zainal Abidin Bujal

KUALA LUMPUR, Jan 13 (Bernama) -- An official from Ford Motor Company, one of the "Big Three" automobile makers in the United States, says that Malaysia can overcome its economic problems fairly quickly.

"Your Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamed said that Malaysia's economic and currency problems are expected to be solved and return to normalcy within six to twelve months, but I am sure the problems can be overcome earlier than that," said its vice chairman, W. Wayne Booker.

Saying that Ford has confidence in the underlying strength of the Malaysian economy, he added that it was also very supportive of efforts by the country's leaders to overcome the present economic problems. Malaysia has been hit by the slide in its currency and equity markets over the past few months.

Booker, who is in Malaysia to participate in the two-day Pacific Dialogue here which ends today, said in an interview with Bernama that Ford has no plan to downsize its operations in Malaysia amidst the economic slowdown as the country is viewed as a very attractive market,

"Ford's brand in Malaysia is gathering momentum as it moved from number seven among the non-national manufacturers and 3.4 percent market share in January 1997 to number four position with a 7.0 percent market share in November last year -- behind Toyota, Nissan and Honda," he said.

By continuing to build its brand and market share in Malaysia during this downturn, Ford hoped to emerge even stronger in the local car market, he added.

"As a long term plan, we will go ahead to increase our investments by adjusting our operating patterns although the economic situation in most Asean countries and other parts of the Pacific is not that favourable," he said.

As a short-term plan, Booker said Ford would further strengthen its distribution network in Malaysia this year to enable the company enjoy a bigger share of of the cake in the automobile industry and make the marque more competitive.

However, Booker conceded that selling Ford cars in Malaysia meant facing greater challenges, especially when viewed against the advantages that national car maker Proton has.

Nevertheless, he said its Malaysian operations still contributed fairly to Ford's overall earnings in the region although it has a bigger operation in Thailand. -- BERNAMA

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