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Automotive industry to enlist US expertise (HL)

Syed Nadzri in Nagoya

AFTER Japan, Britain and France, Malaysia is now looking at the United States to boost its automotive industry.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said talks were under way with a few manufacturers from the US to obtain expertise and assistance for local car makers.

"We already have co-operation from Mitsubishi of Japan and secured engineering capabilities from Lotus of Britain," he said.

Citroen also has joint ventures with Proton, which culminated with the 1,100cc Tiara model - a derivative of the Citroen AX.

"We are now talking to a few automotive companies from the US to boost our industry," he told Malaysian journalists after visiting two Toyota museums and a showroom in Nagoya yesterday.

The Prime Minister was asked about the future of the Malaysian car industry as the world's major players were moving towards consolidation.

He did not specify which American car makers Malaysia was keen on wooing but said with the consolidation, there would be only five main producers - three in the US and one each in Europe and Japan.

Dr Mahathir said the automotive industry was also getting more sophisticated with the use of microchips as components.

He said Malaysians would have to learn this new electronic technology in car-making to keep pace.

The Prime Minister, who is on a six-day visit to Japan, spent almost an entire day visiting Toyota facilities - the Commemorative Museum of Industry and Technology at Nishi-ku, the Toyota Kaikan Exhibition Hall at Toyota City and the Toyota Automobile Museum at Aaichi-gun, all on the outskirts of Nagoya, the fourth largest city in Japan. He was accompanied by Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohamed Ali and son Mokhzani.

The Toyota Commemorative Museum of Industry and Technology displays weaving and spinning machinery used to produce the basics of the automotive industry - parts.

The huge complex also houses a "technoland" where the principles of mechanics are demonstrated, a library equipped with over 35,000 volumes on science and technology and two auditoriums.

The Toyota Kaikan Exhibition Hall tells the story of Toyota's technology and corporate philosophy with emphasis on automotive safety and the company's commitment to the environment. Exhibits include cars and simulators.

There are also car design studios and theatres showing videos on the achievements of the corporation.

And as the name suggests, the Toyota Automobile Museum traces the company's history from its pioneering days late last century right to the present with visions of the future.

At the Kaikan Exhibition Hall, Dr Mahathir also test drove the "Prius Hybrid" model and the prototype "E-Com".

The Prius is a car which combines a petrol engine and electric motors to maximise energy efficiency and reduce emissions, while the lightweight E-Com has advanced microcomputer control also to optimise the use of energy.

Dr Mahathir said he visited the Toyota facilities because of the company's achievements.

He said he was also having discussions with Toyota Motor Corporation chairman Shoichiro Toyoda on Toyota's role in the Malaysian automotive