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Dr M calls for faster progress in R&D

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SHAH ALAM, Sat. - Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today the country will be left behind if no attention is given to research and development.

Expressing his unhappiness over the lack of progress in research and development, he said the private sector and even Government departments and agencies were reluctant to spend money on this because they did not see its potential benefits.

"Without R&D, we will become static, not move ahead and will be left behind," he said after opening Proton Total Research and Development facility at its main plant.

On Proton, Dr Mahathir said that within 13 years, it had made progress which others in the industry had taken more than 50 years to achieve.

"Its people are able to do research, and handle sophisticated and state-of-the-art testing equipment," he said, citing the use of computer simulations for tests that had cut costs.

Earlier, Dr Mahathir suggested that Proton's research arm become an independent entity and provide services to various non-automotive industries.

"I suggest that the R&D be run separately from Proton. It can also conduct research for other companies," he said, adding that such a venture could generate profits.

Citing Lotus Engineering Ltd as an example, Dr Mahathir said the UK-based firm was successful in providing research for other companies because it "keeps their secrets".

Lotus Engineering is part of Lotus Group, the manufacturer of Lotus Elise and Esprit sports cars, which was acquired by Proton in October 1996.

"I'm just making a suggestion, (it's) not a directive," Dr Mahathir said.

Proton is now a complete car manufacturer with the new research and development facility.

The five-department facility is the final building block that Proton needed to become a complete car manufacturer. The five departments are engineering design, engineering services, planning, styling and homologation.

Saying that Proton's facility was on par with that of established automakers, Dr Mahathir said: "I am quite sure that Proton's research and development unit could get a lot of jobs not just from the automotive industry, but from other industries as well.

"With this facility, Proton can make faster progress from now on."

In calling on Proton to make full use of the facility, the Prime Minister said the company should produce cars with innovations and features not found on other vehicles while maintaining quality.

For example, Proton could produce cars with unique features like those capable of repelling heat through the use of appropriate materials and designs.

"There has never been a car produced to suit the hot and humid conditions in this region. Here, we hold the advantage," he said, adding that Proton could also venture into producing cars with lower emission, which consumed less fuel.

Dr Mahathir expressed satisfaction with Proton's development and

progress.

"Since 1985, when the first national car came out, it has made tremendous progress from research and development and testing facilities to marketing. And within a short time it acquired engineering skills (from Lotus).

"There were lots of criticisms when we embarked on the car project then but we remained persistent," he said.

On whether Proton would rely less on its partners - Mitsubishi Corporation and Citroen - now that it had a full-fledged facility, Dr Mahathir said Proton's dependence would be less now.

"We had to rely a lot on them before but not so much now. We feel we should continue to maintain the relationship because in this industry, there are lots of new ideas, input and ways of doing things."

He said it was wrong to say that just because Proton had the facility now, it did not need the help of others anymore.

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