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Malaysia to seek car technology from US (HL)

Syed Nazri in Nagoya

NAGOYA, Tues: Malaysia will seek technology from the US next to boost its motor vehicle industry, which is now inspired mainly by Japanese and British carmakers, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad says. Talks are under way with several American car manufacturers to secure expertise and assistance for local carmakers.

"We already have cooperation from Mitsubishi of Japan and secured engineering capabilities from Lotus of Britain.

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

The Prime Minister was asked about the future of the Malaysian car industry since the trend among the world's major players is now towards consolidation.

He said with consolidation, there would soon be only five main producers - three in the US and one each in Europe and Japan.

Dr Mahathir said the motor vehicle industry is also getting more sophisticated, for example with regards to the use of microchips and other electronics.

Malaysians will have to adopt new carmaking technologies in order to keep pace, he added.

He said he had discussions with Toyota Motor Corp chairman Shoichiro Toyoda on Toyota's role in the Malaysian motor vehicle industry.

Although Mitsubishi has a big role in the country, Toyota could be consultants in small volume assembly plants.

Toyota, he added, has expressed interest because it is indirectly already helping out Perodua in Malaysia through Daihatsu, which it owns. Asked whether it is possible that Toyota might come in to help out in a third national car project, he said now is not the time to think of a third national car considering the consolidation process in the world motor vehicle industry.

Dr Mahathir, who is on a six-day visit to Japan, spent almost the 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 in the outskirts of Nagoya, the fourth largest city in Japan. He was accompanied by Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali and son Mokhzani.

The Toyota Commemorative Museum of Industry and Technology displays weaving and spinning machinery used to produce basic motor vehicle 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 showcases Toyota's advanced technology and corporate philosophy with emphasis on car safety and the company's commitment to a friendly environment. Exhibits include motor vehicles 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 Toyota history since its pioneering days late last century to the present with visions of the future.

At the Kaikan Exhibition centre, Dr Mahathir also test drove the "Prius

Hybrid" car and the prototype "E-Com".

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

He leaves for Tokyo tomorrow where he will have a meeting with Japanese Vice-Minister for International Affairs at the Finance Ministry, Dr Eisuke Sakakibara.

He will attend the launch of his book "A New deal for Asia" and will then speak at the Nikkei International Conference on "The Future of Asia".

The Prime Minister will meet Japanese Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi on Thursday before leaving for Kuala Lumpur on Friday.