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Mahathir-Toyota

MALAYSIA KEEN TO COLLABORATE WITH TOYOTA

By Khairdzir Yunus

NAGOYA, June 1 (Bernama) -- Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today Malaysia is keen to go into collaboration with Toyota Motor Corporation, the world's third biggest car producer, to step up the country's automotive industry.

The prime minister said he told Toyota Motor Corporation chairman Soichiro Toyoda this during their meeting at the company's office here.

Speaking to reporters later, Dr Mahathir said Toyota was also interested in such cooperation. This is especially so with Daihatsu, which is now owned by Toyota, already having a tie-up with Perodua, Malaysia's second national car manufacturer.

The prime minister said many things could be learnt from Japanese car makers, particularly concerning technology and mechanical efficiency,

Malaysia, he said, wished to know about microchips and other electronic applications in new cars.

Dr Mahathir said his visit was aimed at getting acquainted with Toyota's history from the company's inception to its emergence as Japan's biggest and most advanced car manufacturer.

He said Toyota which started off as weaving machine producer advanced quickly to compete against European and American car makers.

"Today, Toyota's Lexus car is considered to be of equal standard to (the German made) Mercedes and other quality cars," he said.

Dr Mahathir said Malaysia had shown its capability to acquire the technology fast compared to other countries including even Japan.

In just 13 years, the country was able to design and produce its own car model, he said.

Asked if Malaysia had plans to produce a third national car, the prime minister said now was not the right time to think about that because the automotive industry was in a consolidation process.

"I am told that there will be only five automotive companies left in the world -- three in America, one in Europe and one more in Japan.

"All of them (present manufacturers) will have merged to become bigger because with more sophisticated technology we require higher output. Otherwise, we won't be competitive," he said.

Dr Mahathir was confident about the future of Proton, which was set up with the cooperation of another Japanese car manufacturer, Mitsubishi.

"We now also have the engineering capability of Lotus," he said referring to the British car maker controlled by Proton.

The prime minister also said that Malaysia was holding talks with several American automotive companies interested in working with the country.

He, however, declined to name the companies concerned and the areas of cooperation involved.

Earlier, Dr Mahathir test drove the electric-powered "e-com" car produced by Toyota and the "Prius Hybrid EV", a car that uses the Toyota hybrid system which combines a gasoline engine and electric motors to maximise energy efficiency and sharply reduce emissions.

He said Malaysia was interested in the hybrid technology and wanted Proton to acquire it.

The prime minister, accompanied by his wife Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohamed Ali and the Toyota chairman, were at the Toyota complex from 9am to 4.30pm.

The visit started off with a tour of the Toyota Commemorative Museum of Industry and Technology, which is housed in the former headquarters plant site of Toyoda Spinning & Weaving Co Ltd, the birthplace of the Toyota group.

Toyota Motor Corporation, established by Sakichi Toyoda in 1937, had 55 plants in 25 countries as of last year.

Dr Mahathir also visited the Toyota Automobile Museum. Opened in 1989, it exhibits various types of cars from the 19th century to the present time.

The exhibits included the "Packard Twelve" car manufactured in 1939 that was used by former US president Franklin D Roosevelt.

Dr Mahathir, who is on a seven-day working visit to Japan, arrived in this city on Saturday.

Tomorrow, he will proceed to Tokyo where he would be meeting Japan's Vice Minister of Finance Eisuke Sakakibara and a group of Japanese editors.

On Thursday, the prime minister will launch his latest book "A New Deal for Asia" in the Japanese capital. He will also deliver a keynote address at an international conference entitled "The Future of Asia" and call on Japanese Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi.

Dr Mahathir will return home on Friday.

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