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PM unveils locally-designed Waja

PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad last night unveiled Malaysia's first locally-designed car, Proton Waja, marking a new era for national car maker Perusahaan Otomobil Nasional (Proton) Bhd.

The debut of the Waja also marked Proton's new corporate logo - a stylised gold tiger head, which is inspired by the two tigers that carry Malaysia's coat of arms.

Addressing a packed indoor stadium in Shah Alam last night, Dr Mahathir said Malaysians can take pride in the national cars as mastering the automotive technology is not easy.

"Malaysia did it within a period of 15 years. The car we see tonight, the Proton Waja, is a car that is fully made in our country by Proton," he added.

Dr Mahathir said Malaysia does not reject collaboration with giant foreign car companies, "but it should be limited to just cooperation because we do not want them to own us. If they own the local automotive industry, then there will be no more national cars."

"National car projects help us to acquire more technology; we have to master this field. Only then will Malaysia be at par with advanced nations," he said.

Dr Mahathir said Malaysia's capability to produce its own car is important as this helps the country to manufacture engineering products.

"Our hope is that by acquiring this automotive technology, we can venture into other manufacturing fields and develop the country's economy by producing the components needed by the automotive industry as well as other industries," he added.

He noted that Malaysia's decision to be involved in the car manufacturing business is not because the country wants to be proud about the venture.

"Through the industry, it is able to learn about the engineering skills needed by a nation wishing to become an advanced country by 2020.

Dr Mahathir acknowledged that Proton's success in the car business can be partly attributed to the protection that the Government gives to the company.

"But we know that in other countries where we market Proton, there is no protection for Proton. Yet, we were able to penetrate many markets in foreign countries including developed nations," he added.

Dr Mahathir said this can only mean that Proton is of world standard.

Speaking to reporters after the launch, Dr Mahathir said Proton is looking at technology exchange partnerships with car giants to strengthen its position in the car business.

"We have been talking to most of the big car companies, including Chrysler-Daimler, Ford and GM (General Motors)," he added.

Such collaborations will further assist Proton to gear itself up for the liberalisation of the automotive market under the Asean Free Trade Area (Afta).

Asked why Malaysia is pushing to defer its commitment to reduce tariffs on the automotive sector under the Afta despite having the capability to design its own car, he said Malaysia will still be able to compete within Afta.

"But everybody needs more time. For a small country like Malaysia, we need some time to improve our capability. It is not only a question of a

level playing field. Players must be of the same size. We need to find ways to protect ourselves against car giants."

Asked whether Proton's newly acquired skill to design cars will affect its ties with foreign partners, Dr Mahathir said the relationship will continue as they are investors in the company.

"We wish to continue this relationship with Mitsubishi Motor Corp. The Japanese partner will always come up with new ideas that should be of benefit to Proton."

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