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PROTON-TECHNOLOGY
PROTON, NOW TECHNOLOGICALLY CAPABLE OF DEVELOPING OWN CARS

KUALA LUMPUR, May 8 (Bernama) -- In just 15 years of its operations, Proton has moved from a user of large chunks of engineering know-how in mass car production of other companies into an almost full-fledged car designer and manufacturer in its own right.

Over the years, technology transfer was attained through tie-ups with more established car makers like Mitsubishi and Citroen, and the acqusition of sports car designer and producer Lotus.

Spin-offs from the acquisition of technology has filtered to and benefited 182 vendors producing 4,417 parts for the first national car manufacturer.

Following a challenge by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad in April 1996 that Perusahaan Otomobil Nasional Bhd (Proton) should design its own car, the company invested almost RM400 million in one of the most modern and technologically-advanced Research & Development facilities in Asia.

The investment involved the most modern Rapid Prototype Centre in the region, the only Prototype Shop in Asean, the only Climatic Chamber Test Lab in Asean and the only Passenger Safety Sled Test in Asia outside Japan.

An additional RM70 million was spent on software like Computer Aided Design, Computer Aided Engineering for Design Analysis on Vehicle and Computer Aided Styling.

Armed with RM970 million, Proton commenced work on a totally new model, its fifth after the Saga, Wira, Tiara and Perdana. Its other model variants include the Iswara, an uplifted version of the Saga as well as the Satria and Putra, variants of the Wira.

"For us, it is a step into new history as for the first time we have designed our own car," said Proton chief executive officer Tengku Datuk Paduka Mahaleel Tengku Ariff.

Speaking at a recent media briefing on Proton's achievements in the automobile industry, including developments in its engineering capability, he said the new approach of designing its own cars would save Proton on foreign exchange outflows and royalty payments.

An estimated RM400 million would be saved on forex outflows by minimising the import content for the new car, called the Waja, and another RM500 million on royalty payments over the lifespan of the product.

As much as RM450 million would be gained from forex inflows through exporting the globally-competitive car, developed together with its United Kingdom subsidiary, Lotus.

Tengku Mahaleel said Proton's philosophy in designing the Waja was to produce a "zero cost" car to ensure that the end product would be affordable and price competitive in the world market.

He also said that compared with the previous Proton cars which were designed for today, the Waja "looks five to 10 years ahead."

A Proton R&D engineer who spoke at the media preview said investment in the new model gave Proton the freedom to create many variants and new models compared with its previous models, based mainly on the Mitsubishi platform.

"The GX (codename for Waja) platform enables us to adopt various powertrains (engine and trasmission) for the car," he added.

He said when Proton developed its first model, the Saga, which was introduced in 1985, a total of 54 months was spent on it while for the

Wira, introduced in 1993, the development time took 48 months.

The time was slashed to 36 months for the Waja, he said, adding that in the future, with digital sharing of design and engineering programmes with Proton's vendors, a development time of 30 months was possible.

For the Waja, 20 Malaysian local vendors were involved for the first time in the designing of their components with Proton engineers.

Through Waja's modular assembly concept, Proton says it is a world class quality car. The new model has almost 20 modules, including the fuel tank, bumper, suspension, steering and door.

Tengku Mahaleel pointed out that the door module, which comes with a power window, is a new technology developed by Proton.

Tests on the new power window system have twice exceeded Proton's quality standards of its current window system, he added.

Looking into the future, Tengku Mahaleel said in 15 years from now, Proton would be transformed into a strong engineering and design company, primarily in the transportation industry.

Proton would make use of Malysia's deferment of cutting tariffs under the Asean Free Trade Area to strengthen itself through, "engineering, engineering and engineering," he said.--BERNAMA

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