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Cash rich Sapura plans to go global

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SAPURA Holdings Bhd has chosen to keep a low profile these days, a sharp contrast to last year when it was embroiled in a hot bid for Time dotCom Bhd.

Whether it is still pushing for a slice of Time dotCom, the listed telecommunications arm of Time Engineering Bhd is yet to be known, but Sapura, which is said to be sitting pretty on more than half a billion ringgit cash, is going ahead and utilising its investments, mostly in the training and development of its employees.

Market watchers are expecting the company - one of the few technology companies in the country to be cash rich - to spring some surprises soon.

Sapura Holdings president and chief executive officer Datuk Shahril Shamsuddin said the company had reason to be so (low profile) especially during the current economic situation.

He said this in Shanghai recently where he had attended the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit together with several senior Malaysian CEOs and senior government officials.

The company is determined to look within to see how it can change.

"We're trying to find out and understand what is it about the global customer which makes it different and what needs we have to meet ... this is what we need to instil in every single employee in Sapura," he said, adding that its 2,000-strong staff offers a complexity by itself.

Admittedly it takes time, said Shahril, but the current economic situation is providing the opportunity to do just that.

"Since things are a bit slow now, we can utilise this time to get around to do better but it is tough...."

Shahril is the managing director of both Uniphone Telecommunications Bhd and Sapura Telecommunications Bhd, two of the three public-listed companies under Sapura Holdings, the family-controlled vehicle.

Founder Tan Sri Shamsuddin Abdul Kadir and his sons Shahril and Shahrman control the three companies.

Going global is well on the company's cards and Shahril said Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's meeting with President George W. Bush in Shanghai last month augured well, sending a good signal to Malaysian businessmen to push forward.

Malaysian industries, said Shahril, better start moving towards global standards and qualities and putting in investments in R&D.

China, with its accession to the World Trade Organisation, is a "resource" not to be overlooked by CEOs and most of them are figuring out how to integrate into the systems of the world's fastest growing economy.

Sapura has already been making inroads in China by helping to sell hotel software and working with universities.

Its simulator system recently showcased during the recent Langkawi International Maritime & Aerospace Exhibition had utilised inputs from a Chinese university.

"We have been patient in making our presence felt in China; we did not rush in as we started a year and a half ago ... the relationship capital has to be built slowly before we learn to do better business," he explained.

Shahril said China would be a big part of the company's future plans.

Right now, Sapura group has set an internal goal to increase its external business to 40 per cent but Shahril was unable to ascertain how

big a chunk would come from China.

"We've already started investments (through the Asia Pacific Institute of Information Technology) in Lahore and Karachi in Pakistan and we also have a campus in Colombo, Sri Lanka, apart from our ongoing businesses in the US."

Also planned are campuses in UAE, Lebanon and Egypt.

Currently, its overseas market constitute 10 per cent of the company's business.

Sapura has also embarked on some initiatives in Brunei.

The company, through its subsidiary Sapura Telecommunications is waiting for the outcome of its joint bid with Malaysia Airports Holdings Bhd to supply the management system for the Bangkok International Airport.

It has supplied a similar system for the Kuala Lumpur International Airport.