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Honda prefers to call them 'associates'

MALACCA, Wed. - A majority of them are locals, all are below 40, skilled and most of them speak fluent Japanese.

They are "associates" of Honda Malaysia Sdn Bhd, and work at its state-of-the-art manufacturing and assembly plant in Pegoh here.

"Associates" is what Honda, which is Japan's third largest car manufacturer, prefers to call its employees.

There are 599 associates at the RM170 million plant which will be opened by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad tomorrow.

Only 15 are Japanese expatriates, while the rest are locals, mostly from Malacca.

Their job is to ensure that cars rolling out of the plant are on a par with Hondas manufactured in other parts of the world.

Honda Malaysia deputy general manager (manufacturing division) Azhar Abdul Wahab said they had started manufacturing the popular CRV model last month.

"We have not faced problems meeting our targets," he said, adding that some 12,000 drive-shafts produced at the plant since October last year had been exported to the company's facility in Thailand.

Azhar said the Honda plant's operations are run mainly by the local workforce and the company had sent 35 engineers to Japan, Thailand and the Philippines for training on the production and assembly details.

The engineers now form the core of the company's operations at the plant here.

One of the women, Maizathul Shima Othman, 25, speaks fluent Japanese and is head of the engine assembly plant. Her job is to oversee 20 workers who put the engines into the vehicles.

The mechanical engineering graduate from the Technical College in Yamaguchi said she enjoyed dismantling and assembling engines, and had no problems working in a male-dominated environment.

"I used to work at a factory manufacturing car stereos and home audio equipment. Working with car engines is what I really like, and I am glad to be able to put my skills to good use," she said.

Another employee, Roslan Abdul Wahab, 39, heads the welding department.

He used to work at the Proton plant in Shah Alam before joining Honda last year.

Roslan, who also speaks fluent Japanese, was sent to the Honda plants in the Philippines and Thailand for training, and now supervises 75 workers.

Ritaudin Azali, 24, who is head of the production control unit, is a mechanical engineering graduate from Japan. He said the locals were as capable of running the plant as foreigners.

Honda Motor Company Ltd of Japan owns 51 per cent of Honda Malaysia while DRB-Hicom Bhd has a 34 per cent stake and Oriental Holdings Bhd 15 per cent.