

Taking the lead in safety

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REPORTING

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CRASH TEST LABORATORY: The facility in Malacca aims to come up with an acceptable Asean NCAP rating

YOU wouldn't have believed that an epochal event for the Asean region was about to take place in such a peaceful durian orchard in Malacca.

Located in the sweeping grounds of the Road Transport Department's Academy grounds near Malacca was the Crash Test Laboratory of the Malaysian Institute of Road Safety (Miros) which was set up recently.

Sharp on the dot of 4pm, with an unearthly sound like a banshee, a white Toyota Vios rushed into view and smashed into a concrete block at what seemed like a fatal speed.

Even though it was a simulated crash under laboratory conditions, it was a sickening sight that elicited a collective sigh, and some stifled screams from the 15 photographers and media representatives squeezed into the stuffy observation room of the Miros PC3 Crash Lab.

The crash simulation was the finale of a week-long Automotive Safety Exhibition and Seminar held in Malacca, in association with the Global New Car Assessment Programme (NCAP), a London-based foundation established by the Paris-based FIA (Federation Internationale de l'Automobile).

The PC3 Miros Crash Test Lab is the first in Asean and it establishes Malaysia as the focal point for assessing the safety of cars made in the region.

Miros director general Dr Wong Voon Shaw expects to produce the NCAP (or safety report cards for cars) for seven made-in-Asean vehicles this October. Each of the cars will be a best selling model, of the lowest specification, from seven

manufacturers.

There are many things to explain here.

Firstly, safety. Like it or not, safety is a prerogative of those who can afford it. Volvo was the first car maker in the world that crash tested cars so that its R&D engineers could validate the data needed to build safer cars. They installed a fancy new crash test facility about a decade ago to replace a much older lab.

It was the United States which started the New Car Assessment Programme (usually called NCAP) in 1979 in response to the Motor

Vehicle Information and Cost Savings Act of 1972. The Act was enacted to encourage manufacturers to build safer vehicles.

The first standardised, 35mph (56km) front crash test was done on May 21, 1979, and the first results were released on Oct 15 that year.

Since then, the US' NHTSA (National Highway Traffic Safety Administration) has issued a final ruling requiring manufacturers to place NCAP star ratings (5-star is the best safety rating) on the automobile sticker price.

Britain, another rich nation,

quickly saw the importance of NCAP and it fathered the Euro NCAP, but on a voluntary basis, in the same year of the US crash test.

The Brussels-based Euro NCAP is now backed by the European Commission, seven European governments, as well as motoring and consumer organisations in every EU country.

Other regions in the world with similar programmes include Australia and New Zealand with ANCAP, Latin America with Latin NCAP and China with China NCAP.

Hopefully, the Miros and Malay-

sian government led initiative will lead to Thailand and Indonesia to accept an Asean NCAP.

Finally, tribute must be paid to Prof Radin Omar, who – as a lecturer in Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) and then as the first head of Miros – started Malaysia on its journey towards road safety awareness. Congratulations also to the team headed by current Miros head Dr Wong Voon Shaw, the ex-student of Prof Radin, and to other graduates and engineers of UPM who are the pioneering team in the Miros PC3 lab test. Together with Datuk Solah Mat Hasan, the RTD director general, the three honourable chaps have created the Miros PC3 Crash Test Lab in four years.

For Datuk Solah, it will be a crown to his achievements on his planned retirement in September.

FIA contribution

WHEN Max Mosley was still the chairman of the FIA – the Paris-based world governing body over motor vehicle sports and, incidentally, safety – he established the FIA Foundation on road safety in London.

The FIA Foundation contributed RM1 million to the first phase of the Miros PC3 which includes the crash testing and assessment of seven made-in-Asean cars.

The Automobile Association of Malaysia (AAM) is an affiliate of the FIA, whose current chairman is Jean Todt, the constant companion and confidante of Malaysian actress Datuk Michelle Yeoh.

Prince Michael of Kent is the patron of the Commission for Global Road Safety and has been to Malaysia often, the last official visit being the opening of the Malaysian office of the Institute of the Motor Industry.



Wong (left) and his mentor Radin are among the prime movers of Asean's first crash test lab. Says Wong, "I was just a young boy when Prof Radin was my lecturer. He motivated me and taught me all the things that led to this crash test lab." Inset: Solah.