


**FOCUS**

## APIC invitation

*The Association for Promotion of International Cooperation (APIC) and the Foreign Press Centre of Japan have come together once again to give regional journalists insight into how the country goes about mitigating the effects of natural disasters.*

*Japan, a country known in recent times for earthquakes and tsunamis, has spent hundreds of millions of dollars on special technology and building methods to protect its citizenry.*

*This year, APIC has invited six journalists from the Caribbean and Pacific region to get a first-hand look at those methods.*

*Associate Editor Barry Alleyne is there representing THE NATION.*

**FOMM'S** Development Division's vice general manager Mitsuaki Hirakawa beside the 1.0 electrical vehicle, which can float in the event there is flooding.

(Picture by Wakaphotos)



# Floating on wheels

by **BARRY ALLEYNE**  
in Kyoto, Japan

**THIS IS THE EPITOME** of floating an idea around until it works.

The FOMM Corporation in Kawasaki-shi, a tech savvy company in Japan, has come up with a brilliant idea they are hoping catches on in the flood-prone country of Thailand.

FOMM has designed the world's first mass-produced compact electric floating vehicle.

Thought you didn't hear correctly? You did.

That's right. This car floats, and though it moves at the same speed as a human walking when wading through water, officials of FOMM are hoping to manufacture 4 000 units for its first delivery to Thailand next year.

Four-seater vehicles the size of the FOMM 1.0 are still illegal in Japan in spite of intense lobbying from FOMM founder Hideo Tsurumaki, so the company has approached the Thai government after completing a countrywide survey there to determine the viability of their product.

The small lightweight car is made from a special plastic, and without its electric battery, weighs just over 44 kilograms, making it quite unsuitable for driving on the highway, but perfect for Thailand's small roads,

which can become an ocean during the annual monsoon season.

"We wanted to create a car that could run on land, and also float on water efficiently," FOMM's Development Division's vice-general manager Mitsuaki Hirakawa told six journalists from the Caribbean and Pacific countries, who are in Japan for a special programme organised jointly by the Association for Promotion of International Cooperation (APIC) and the Foreign Press Centre Japan.

"We are always dreaming to create a car the world would want. Our technology should excite as we contribute to the global environment," Hirakawa added.

### Energy-efficient vehicles

The FOMM 1.0 will cost buyers a little over BDS\$20 000, and will be one of the most cost and energy-efficient electric vehicles on the planet, when production is completed next September.

Its maximum power is 10 kilowatts, but the little dynamo is scarily quiet, and has a top speed of 80 kilometres per hour.

But where it stands out, or maybe where it sits out, is when the rains come.

As soon as the vehicle senses it is in water, the two special motors attached to the front-wheel-drive

mechanism engage, forcing water underneath the body of the car and pushing it through the water, though at a slow speed.

The aim is for residents in flood-prone areas still to be able to move around if and when torrential rains come. In Thailand, it takes less than one hour for 50 millimetres of rain to turn streets into a canal of raging water.

With FOMM 1.0, officials expect there to be no panic, since the vehicle's lone battery is sealed in a waterproof canister, and driver or passengers are protected from the elements by the car's special plastic frame.

Since working with the Thai government, FOMM has changed numerous parts to come up with 1.0, redesigning sliding doors, changing where the acceleration paddles on the steering wheel are positioned, and even improving space in the back of the four-seater.

Officials were mum on the operating cost of making each unit, but noted should the vehicle take off in Thailand, they were hoping to expand to other areas in Asia in which laws allow that size compact electric car.

It takes just six hours to fully charge the battery from a household 220-volt unit, and a full battery can take a driver 167 kilometres if the air conditioner isn't used. To keep cool, drivers get around 100 kilometres from a fully charged battery.