

Toyota President Ushers In 'New Beginning'

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TOYOTA, Japan (AP) — Toyota President Akio Toyoda urged thousands of his employees Friday to work toward a new start and win back customer trust following safety lapses that have battered the world's biggest carmaker.

"Let's go with high spirits, have fun and be confident while staying humble," Toyoda, choking up and wearing a gray workman's jacket, told 2,000 workers packed into the company's headquarters. "We are making a start today."

His address, billed as "An Urgent Meeting for All Toyota — Toward a New Beginning for Toyota," was also watched via live video by 7,000 workers at company plants. Representatives of suppliers and dealers also attended the event in the Japanese city named after the automaker.

Toyoda returned to Japan earlier this week after being grilled by U.S. lawmakers in a congressional hearing on the spate of quality lapses that include braking problems and sticking gas pedals the cause sudden acceleration. The problems have resulted in global recalls of 8.5 million vehicles, 6 million of them in the U.S.

Other executives who appeared before congressional hearings on Toyota's recalls also attended Friday's event.

The head of Toyota's North American sales unit, Jim Lentz, assured the crowd the company was working hard to restore customer trust. He urged all to be prepared for "a long road ahead" of harsh criticism.

Workers, who applauded executive speeches, said they were moved.

"I could feel the president's anguish, and I felt we all must work harder," Hideki Watanabe, 51, a Lexus engineer, said after the 45-minute meeting. "It breaks my heart to think that the cars we are making to bring joy to people might cause sorrow and accidents."

U.S. transport regulators have linked 52 deaths to crashes allegedly caused by sudden, unintended acceleration in Toyota cars.

Toyota Motor Sales USA Inc. said Thursday it was following up information from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration that Toyota drivers have experienced unintended acceleration even after receiving the repair involved in the accelerator pedal recall.

The NHTSA has received more than 60 complaints from Toyota drivers who say their cars have sped up by themselves after being fixed to correct the problem. Toyota said most of these reports have yet to be verified but it is committed to

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investigating them.

An executive vice president, Takeshi Uchiyamada, said the Toyota brand was in "a serious crisis," acknowledging the company must improve monitoring of consumer complaints and respond more quickly during crises.

Toyota has been widely criticized, especially in the U.S., where most of the recalls have happened, as slow and unresponsive, and doubts are growing it may not be transparent or forthright about defects.

"The path to regaining trust remains tremendously difficult," Uchiyamada said. "But I would like to work with all of you."

Toyota's recalls have received widespread media attention in Japan, but loyalty to the company remains relatively strong.

The only models being recalled in Japan are hybrids, including the popular Prius, the nation's top-selling car for 10 straight months, which is being repaired for an antilock braking glitch.

But Toyoda has repeatedly said the company's rapid growth abroad may have gotten in the way of maintaining the highest standards of quality control.

Tearful and his voice catching with emotion, Toyoda thanked workers for their support and promised that Toyota would rise again if the ranks stood together.

"I thought I was protecting everyone, but I realized I had merely been protected by everyone," he said.

Mitsuru Kawai, 62, a plant worker for more than 40 years, said Toyota will pull through the crisis, although he has never seen anything quite like it before.

"We went through the oil shock, the burst of the 'bubble' economy, and we've had recalls. But we've gone through all those hardships," he said. "Overcoming all that has helped make Japan stronger, and I am going to keep working."

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