

17/11/1997

## Achieving common goals amidst a growing friendship

Anis Kamil

"I HAVE a love affair with Asia. It started as a real passion when I was in my teens. As soon I grew up, I came to see Asia for myself."

French President Jacques Chirac said this in February 1996 while on his way to the inaugural Asia-Europe (Asem) meeting in Bangkok.

He is now once again indulging his passion. He arrived yesterday in Pulau Langkawi for a two-day unofficial meeting with Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

It was his third meeting with Dr Mahathir within the space of a year. So many meetings between heads of governments are rare, more so when they concern two countries who have no history or traditions to tie them together.

The improved ties between the two countries has really only occurred since the election of Chirac as President.

Previous leaders had paid scant attention to Asia, except to the formerly French-speaking countries of Indochina.

According to French ambassador Edouard Braine, Dr Mahathir had been sending signals to the French for many years, but the French did not respond fast enough or open enough.

"We had a poor Asian vision. For example, why did it take us so long to lift the visa requirement? We were the only European country still requesting tourist visas from Malaysians.

"I removed that requirement as my arrival gift to Malaysia, but unfortunately no one noticed because I was a 'bad' person at that time," says Braine ruefully.

He had the misfortune to arrive at the time when France was carrying out nuclear tests in the Pacific atoll.

Chirac is the politician who understands Asia the best. He visited Malaysia in 1993, when he was still the Mayor of Paris. Braine says at the time Chirac had no real reason to come to Malaysia. He came just to visit Dr Mahathir, other Malaysian leaders and to see what Malaysia was like.

It turned out to be more than he had expected. Malaysia's Special Envoy to France Tan Sri Ahmad Kamil Jaafar says with a smile:

"When I met Chirac years later he kept mentioning that the PM had berated him on Bosnia and France's attitude on the issue.

"I think as a result of the number of meetings they have had, Chirac is a man who shares many common perceptions with Dr Mahathir. Not only in terms of our bilateral relations but also the positions we take on issues of international dimensions, have helped bring them closer.

"There is mutual respect between the two leaders."

Braine says the two countries have common objectives and views. Both countries believe that differences should be respected, people should learn to live with one another no matter how different they are and that strength and power is not the solution to everything.

"Dr Mahathir has his own views and we have ours, and it is good for both that we can share and have freedom of expression, so that we don't have only this one-sided American view of the world.

"We both agree in criticising a world where there is a monopoly of power.

"We don't accept the idea of an American senator applying his laws to the rest of the world," says Braine.

Referring to the D'Amato Act, Kamil says: "It is a question of

principle: no country has the right to pronounce that others are breaking the law of their land. If you allow that to happen you can forget about the WTO (World Trade Organisation) and the UN (United Nations)."

Malaysia and France also share common perceptions on the situation in the Middle East, specifically the Israel-Palestine issue.

On Chirac's visit to Israel last year, he turned down a tour of Jerusalem stating France's view that it did not recognise Israel's sovereignty over Arab East Jerusalem.

Kamil says Malaysia and France also share common interest in Africa. There are many things that the countries can do together, especially in the countries of the Maghreb and sub-Sahara regions.

The first bilateral meeting between the two leaders occurred in November last year, after Dr Mahathir had visited Ghana and French Guyana for the launching of Measat 2. He then flew to Paris and met Chirac.

The second meeting was in July this year, when Dr Mahathir was invited as the guest of honour by Chirac for the Bastille Day celebrations. It was at this meeting that Africa was discussed.

"It is Chirac's idea to have a guest of honour next to him for our National Day celebrations. The first person he invited last year was the highly respected, South African President Nelson Mandela.

"This year, he invited a good friend of Mandela, Dr Mahathir. So Africa was present in two ways. After the parade, they decided that we should do something in Africa," says Braine.

According to the ambassador, France is the highest provider of aid to the African continent, amounting to half the total aid to Africa. Japan is the second largest donor to Africa.

"The Americans who pretend to develop an African policy, come in sixth or seventh. They also accuse France of preventing newcomers into Africa.

"We wish to show that we are willing and wishing to see new partners in Africa.

"This is a message we wish to convey with our Malaysian and Japanese friends. Simply, that anyone who wants to join is welcome," says Braine.

He explains that the ODA (official direct assistance or overseas development assistance) now available is not enough to bring development to Africa and due to financial problems, the amount cannot increase.

"Malaysia, using its own assets and strengths has been able to solve very brilliantly the question of development.

"You must have some formula which should be of interest to developing countries," says the ambassador.

Kamil says: "France has traditional relations with some African countries. Our strengths in Africa is that the PM enjoys the respect of some of their leaders.

"So if we can work together and base our efforts on the strengths that each have, we may be able to assist these countries in their move towards development and growth."

Braine says the idea is still pretty new as it was launched in July.

The matter was first discussed between the two special envoys - Kamil and his French counterpart, Jean-Claude Paye.

Currently, they are still identifying possible fields and countries, where both countries can develop a common approach.

"We have not discussed this with our African friends, because we first should find out what we have to offer.

"Clearly it is based on the idea developed by Dr Mahathir in the Langkawi Dialogue of 'Smart Partnerships'", says Braine.

Braine says the Total and Petronas joint venture is not the only Malaysian-French joint ventures in third countries. Both have many successful joint ventures in Cambodia.

Closer to home, while France has not been a traditional trading partner, French investments in Malaysia has increased over the years.

"In the past, we were looking at a few countries for economic synergy, not realising that France had a lot to offer in the areas of defence, telecommunications, the automotive industry and so on," says Kamil.

France too was looking at Malaysia in terms of improving economic relations.

Braine says France cannot afford to have a hole in the map of the world. And because of Malaysia's successful economy, it is important for France to develop market share in a highly developing economy rather than in countries where progress is slow.

On a more down-to-earth level, Braine tells a story of how he received a note from Datuk Law Hieng Ding, Minister of Science, Technology and Environment one Friday evening.

The note said Dr Mahathir had read in an aviation magazine that the French Fire Brigade was one of the best in the world. Law asked if there was some way France could help with Malaysia's haze problem.

By Monday morning, three experts from France were in Law's office discussing the assistance that France could give, in terms of equipment and training.

Thirty specialists were then sent here to help train Malaysian firefighters.

Braine says there is more to the relations than economics or politics. He hopes that like the leaders, the people too can become good friends and help one another.

"The time has come to re-discover one another. We must realise what we have become, and all that we can achieve together," Chirac once said.

This Langkawi meeting will certainly continue to bring both leaders and countries closer.

(END)