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Of relations, jobs and the euro

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FRANCE's effort to create an equilibrium in establishing a French language base for the world to offset the dominance of English - currently the global tongue - is being met with both interest and indifference.

President Jacques Chirac found himself slightly disappointed, perhaps troubled, at the Francophone summit in Hanoi after African participants contested the so-called unanimous election of former United Nations chief, the English-speaking Egyptian Boutros Boutros-Ghali, as its representative.

From Vietnam, Chirac went to Southeast Asia, where he strengthened his already excellent relations with Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Bilateral and international problems were under scrutiny between both statesmen, notably the construction of methane tankers for Malaysia: the issue being the choice between France and Japan for the contract.

Chirac emphasised the advantages offered by the French company, Les Chantiers de l'Atlantique, in the French town of Saint Nazaire.

But Patrick Boissier, the company's chief executive officer, said: "Should we lose the contract, the company would nevertheless survive."

On a more global approach of the current international issues, Chirac reiterated his confidence in the economic future of the region, particularly of Malaysia, whose solid and rigorous management assured a stable base.

During the Press conference by the two statesmen, Charic alluded to the present monetary problems in Southeast Asia, saying that the excessive speculation by a few must be contained.

He further recalled France's proposal at the Lyon's G7 meeting in June last year, to reinforce international co-operation, asking for a true dialogue between the G7 industrialised countries and the G15 emerging economy countries, concluding that no solution of the monetary problems could be found within a solitary conference.

Chirac expressed his gratitude for the reception given in Pulau Langkawi, concluding that he had but one regret - that of not being able to stay longer in such lovely surroundings.

Under the dynamic team of French Ambassador Edouard Braine, the visiting French journalists were given a varied, and above all, well substantiated presentation of French firms established in Malaysia, some of international rank, some less known, but all showing the will and ability to succeed.

Back at home, another reality had to be faced. The Luxembourg Job summit was, in the words of economic journalists, a non-event, as was expected.

No serious decision was made, only many good intentions were heard but not sustained by sanctions.

In the past five years, the number of European Job summits has run into double figures, with no discernible effect on the issues that matter.

The ineffective, familiar pattern of conflicting strategies, muddled thinking and rhetorical inconsistencies have shown the futility of it all on a European basis.

The national cultural elements cannot be dismissed, thus, no European solution can be dictated.

When the countries involved admit that sacrifices, decreased privileges, and strict restructuring are inevitable, then a new road will open.

But France is taking the exact opposite way.

Prime Minister Lionel Jospin is enjoying increasing popularity, no doubt because of his no-nonsense approach to politics, and because none of his co-workers belong to the close friends of former President Francois Mitterrand. There seems to be a certain bitterness between those called Mitterrandists and the socialists, subtle but palpable.

The socio-economic situation in France, regardless of who is at the helm, is rather interesting and the near future is fraught with social agitation, fuelled by the recent government enactment of more work days, the 35-hour work-week, the public servants pay increase, all resulting in a gagging effect on the country's economy.

In a different sphere, there seems to be a revival of sensible, realistic and above all courageous journalism in France.

One of its representatives, Francois Roche, editor-in-chief of an economics magazine, gives a clear analysis of Franco-German relations, which are at a low ebb.

"Leaving behind the historical taboos or reciprocal fault-finding attitudes, Roche stresses that the euro is on the march, that when firmly entrenched, it will cement both countries into a solid European bastion, able to contribute to the global accomplishment.

The twenty-page-long report gives what seems to be an accurate account of the moods, likes and dislikes, and the criticisms of the people.

Statistics compare the French provinces with the German Laender, today and in the year ahead.

Both countries suffer the same ailments, but the solutions are different.

If diversity is source of wealth, Europe will be rich, provided it manages to harness what some call its dissimilarity.

The contributors to this thorough study are proving that the path to follow is inexorable, the sooner the responsible actors realise the fact, the better the result. Merged, France and Germany form a redoubtable economic power.

A protagonist of the union is Karl Lammers, who says it is possible and goes on to detail the way it can be achieved.

A comment that is more of a censure, states that Chirac and Jospin have opened a crisis whose evolution and ending they do not control. In case of a semi-failure, France would be at the losing end.

However, Alsace, a sort of buffer for centuries, that knows both countries rather well, has been able to retrain its own identity throughout its historical vicissitudes, forging perhaps the living vector, the road leading back to the Europe of Charlemagne.

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