

23/04/1999

## Taking Malaysia-France ties to new heights

Anis Kamil

FRANCE's new ambassador to Malaysia, Xavier Driencourt says he applied for the posting here. His predecessor Edouard Braine had been very happy here and he had wanted an Asian experience, specifically a Malaysian experience.

"Malaysia and France have excellent relations, there is a special relationship between our leaders and as a diplomat it would be a rewarding posting and a milestone in one's career.

"Malaysia had a lot of recommendations, it is an interesting country, very quiet and beautiful."

"I arrived on Sept 1, on that same evening I received a phone call and was told that Malaysia had imposed new currency control measures and there were changes in the economic decisions.

"Then the following day, the Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim was sacked. So it was more or less complicated for a new ambassador," he says with a laugh. Not quite the quiet country he had expected, but it had become an interesting place.

He says while the situation in Malaysia is not too complicated and fairly simple, it is difficult to explain the gap between the reality and the image of Malaysia that has been portrayed.

Furthermore some people in Europe tend to confuse Malaysia and Indonesia. Consequently, the problems faced by Indonesia have unfortunately had an impact on the image of Malaysia.

"This is the reason why my job is to explain to the French businessmen that there is a gap between the image that is portrayed and the reality.

"The best solution is to have as many visits by businessmen, politicians, ministers and others from France as possible to show them the reality."

France is confident in the economic growth and stability of Malaysia, Driencourt says one of his main objectives is to urge more French businesses to invest in Malaysia.

He also feels that both countries should take advantage of the special relationship that has developed between both leaders.

"We also have to explain what France is. It is not just designer clothes and perfumes. We have aerospace industry, automotive industry ... we have to show the new face of France," says Driencourt.

Malaysian automotive companies are in joint ventures with Citroen, Renault and Peugeot.

In 1990, there were 100 French companies in Malaysia, by last year there were 253 companies. Total trade in 1993 was RM13.11 billion and in the first 11 months of last year it totalled RM12.43 billion. For five of those six years, the balance of trade has been in Malaysia's favour.

"How many people know that nearly 30 per cent of the rubber gloves produced in the world are made by a French firm in Malaysia? Or that the water you drink, is treated by a French company?"

Another of his goals is to promote exchanges and co-operation in education and training. While he realises Malaysians might have problems with French, he is certain that both sides can find other ways and synergies in these areas.

He says it is not so much a question of language as a way of thinking. The French think differently than the British. The French are more "cartesian" or logical and the British more pragmatic.

Certainly, in recent months, the Malaysian "way of thinking" on international issues, is closer to the French than other countries.

Especially now that Malaysia is on the United Nations Security Council, the two countries should take every opportunity to exchange views on various subjects like Iraq, Kosovo, and the reforms of the international financial architecture.

Earlier this year, Jacques Chirac had asked French Senator Xavier de Villepin to visit Malaysia and explain the French ideas on the issue. Last year, during the Iraqi crisis, the President had sent a special envoy, to discuss the problem with Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Both countries are not only working on traditional bilateral and multilateral efforts. Recently, there was an agreement between France, Japan and Malaysia for co-operation in Africa.

"For historical reasons, France has close relations with Africa and we know that Malaysia is also very active in Africa. So this co-operation although new should prove to be interesting."

His predecessor's advice to him was to see as much of Malaysia as possible, especially not to spend too much time in Kuala Lumpur. And in the six months, he has managed to heed that advice.

"I've been to Penang, Malacca, Johor Baru, Kuantan, Negeri Sembilan, Sarawak and Sabah. There are still many places I have not visited. It is important to feel the pulse of the country and Kuala Lumpur is not representative of Malaysia.

"And of course I have been to Langkawi because my President told me I must go to Langkawi because it is the most beautiful island he has ever seen," says Driencourt with a smile.

If he had to sum up his first six months, he would say that Malaysia is "very friendly but complicated", although he adds perhaps in three years' time he will say it is "very friendly and less complicated".

(END)