

04/01/2004

Ong wants more Malaysians to invest in the Philippines

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AT first glance, Romualdo Anover Ong appears to be the kind of person whose actions could speak louder than words.

The natural reserve of the Ambassador of the Philippines to Malaysia, especially in official settings, may unwittingly make him come across as one who might answer questions with monosyllabic replies.

Ong may appear distinctly uncomfortable in large crowds, preferring to stay on the sides and away from the limelight.

That is until one engages in a conversation with the avuncular and discovers that he is actually a raconteur.

The 1961 graduate in foreign service studies from the University of Philippines can trade stories and jokes with the best in a unique style that leaves one wanting more after the punchline.

Ong, with several senior postings under his belt, is the consummate story-teller with an unlimited repertoire of interesting events.

His inscrutable face invariably breaks into a wide grin when narrating a particularly hilarious event as this writer discovered in a recent interview at his chancellery in a spacious bungalow in Changkat Kia Peng, Kuala Lumpur.

He had earlier narrated the story of how he has an "adopted" daughter in China who happened to be a descendant of a Sultan of Sulu who died in the mainland while on an official visit hundreds of years ago.

Ong excels in the revelation of minutiae related to incidents such as the fact that the accidental meeting with the girl took place at the home of the late Deng Xiaoping or that the Chinese leader's son was a paraplegic.

In the 90-minute interview, he also slipped in an interesting account of how the embassy came to be housed at the bungalow formerly owned by a member of the royalty and how he used to play basketball until recently.

Ong (of Chinese ancestry going back to the home of the Hokkien people in Xiamen, south China), however, did not come to Malaysia earlier this year with just an excellent sense of humour.

He flew into Kuala Lumpur on June 1 armed with an impressive set of credentials earned at home and abroad.

He has been been ambassador to China (he was also once minister counsellor there), the Russian Federation and Australia besides being director of the Philippine Foreign Service Institute immediately before this posting.

He has vast experience in regional affairs, having once headed the Philippine delegation to the Asean Standing Committee besides representing Asean in negotiations with the European Commission in the past.

It is, therefore, not surprising that he was chosen by President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo to represent her country in Malaysia which counts as one of the Philippines' closest neighbours in more ways than one.

"We have extensive people-to-people contact with at least half a million people of Filipino descent in Sabah. Geographically speaking, we are as close as can be," he says with an earnestness that has won him many friends in the short six months that he has been here.

He can be expected to continue with the good work of his predecessor Jose Brilliantes in cementing ties that had been strained for a short while during the term of former President Joseph Estrada.

The former film star had a penchant for making statements that sometimes

breached the Asean consensus on non-interference in domestic affairs.

But that is a thing of the past with much water having passed under the bridge since the heady days of Estrada's presidency.

Halcyon days, notwithstanding, Ong still has his work cut out for him.

There is the thorny issue of security at the common border which has seen several kidnapping incidents in Sabah which have demonstrated the inherent dangers in a border that sits on water.

There is also the question of territories under dispute such as the Spratly Islands which are fully or in part claimed by China, Taiwan, the Philippines, Malaysia and Brunei.

Or the question of the future of the half a million Filipinos in Sabah and how they can be assimilated into the mainstream of society in that State.

Ong happily refers to a recent symposium he attended where it was ascertained that the Filipinos in Sabah were no longer considered a security threat but rather victims of crime.

The larger question of the Philippines' claim over Sabah still looms on the horizon although Ong, like the Philippines, is happy to leave the issue alone.

"We have not formally dropped the claim but have a tacit agreement with Malaysia to leave the issue alone," he says, adding that it is almost a forgotten matter.

Arroyo, he says, has not raised the issue with Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi nor did she pursue it with former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Ong also has a range of tasks to tackle, from consular duties involving Filipinos here and security issues centred around the common border to the tricky question of how to attract more Malaysian investors to the Philippines.

Bilateral trade is another area that Ong wants to improve despite last year's impressive trade figure of RM10.64 billion.

"I would like to invite more Malaysian investors to the Philippines as there are numerous opportunities in the agro-industrial sector, in infrastructure and in the construction industry," he says, adding that the Malaysia-Philippines Business Council has been active in pursuing joint business activities.

Ong, whose wife Farita is also a senior diplomat, is optimistic of economic opportunities arising from the BIMP-EAGA pact involving Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines.

He hints that a large Malaysian aluminium company is planning an investment in the Philippines but candidly states that this does not come within the purview of the embassy.

Another issue of immediate attention is that of the peace process in Mindanao in which Malaysia is playing a leading role in bringing the Philippine Government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front to the negotiation table.

"Malaysia has very graciously offered to play the role of mediator and broker the peace process and we hope that peace will come very soon to southern Philippines," he says.

Ong is also preparing for a task that Philippine diplomatic missions worldwide will soon be handling for the first time - facilitating voting for the general election by overseas Filipinos.

"For the first time in our history, overseas Filipinos will be able to vote. I expect many Filipinos in Malaysia to come to the embassy.

"We are preparing for this by following detailed instructions from the Philippine Government."

He expects the next five months until May, when the elections are to be

held, to be busy for his embassy staff.

For the longer term, he wants to change the face of the average Filipino here from that of largely lower-level expatriate workers, especially maids, to one of tourists "who are here because they want to be and not because they have to be".

He takes pains to point out that there are a growing number of Filipino businessmen here.

He is passionate about the issue of Filipinos who have been forced to go abroad to search for greener pastures because of poor employment opportunities at home.

"It is due to their hard work that the Philippine economy gets an annual injection of RM26 billion," he says.

Ong, who is reticent about whether he will continue here next year after mandatory retirement, says he will leave it to his Government to decide, "although this may be my last port of call".

With his credentials and the fact that Arroyo appears to be the frontrunner in the presidential race, he can be expected to be carry on in Malaysia well into retirement.