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EC envoy Rommel, man in a hurry

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THE telephone number for the European Commission delegation's office in Kuala Lumpur, please?"

The question stumps the Telekom Malaysia operator, with the tone of her reply clearly suggesting that she has never heard of the organisation.

A second attempt informing her that the office is actually an embassy does not yield anything better, with this writer being asked if he is not mistaking a business organisation for a diplomatic mission.

"Are you sure you do not want the High Commission of the United Kingdom or the Embassy of the United States?" she asks with the patience born out of answering queries about non-existent organisations.

After a minute or two of queries that go nowhere, the conversation comes to a natural conclusion.

This is probably the kind of response that Dr Thierry Rommel, ambassador and head of the European Commission delegation in Malaysia, encounters when he introduces himself at non-diplomatic functions.

Hardly surprising really, given the fact that until April, many Malaysians had not yet heard of the EC.

It clearly would have been an uphill task for Rommel over the past seven months to establish his credentials as a bona fide head of diplomatic mission with the task of representing specific issues on behalf of the 15-member states that make up the European Union.

He has established a website (<http://www.delmys.cec.eu.int>) as one of the initial steps in educating Malaysians on the intricacies of the EU mechanism.

He has also printed colourful cards with a brief introduction to the website that underlines the fact that it aims "to contribute to a more accurate and encompassing knowledge and understanding of the European Union".

Rommel, who comes across as a no-nonsense diplomat in a hurry, has managed creditably with his presence at diplomatic functions and other local events where he actively pursues a two-pronged objective.

"I want to inform people about the European Commission and what it can offer to interlocutors.

"I also want to listen to Malaysians and ascertain what the EU can do in terms of facilitating trade and other relationships with the EU through instruments available to us," he says in a thick French-Belgian accent that sometimes had this writer truly confused on meaning and intent.

There is no difficulty, however, in understanding the fact that Rommel is as familiar as can be with the dynamics of the relationship between the EU and Malaysia, or indeed the region.

"I want to establish contact with the administration, the business community, the media, the non-governmental groups, the academic world. I want to reach out fairly widely and in an encompassing manner."

The PhD holder in economics from the University of Chicago is a cornucopia of information about trade, people-to-people communication and social ties between the 15 nations he represents (to become 25 in May next year) and Malaysia.

"The EU is a treaty-based legal construction whereby the member states of the EU decide to manage together matters that they feel are of common and shared interest," he says in a recent interview at his 10th floor office at Wisma Tan and Tan in Kuala Lumpur.

If he represents the interests of EU member states, what do their ambassadors and high commissioners here do?

Rommel is quick to point out that there is a clear delineation of duties between them as "my arrival here has not led to the closing down of the missions of the member states".

"The decision-making comes at the level of the grouping. The grouping itself has institutions that are able to be the locomotive to move on with this process of implementation and monitoring of the implementation of decisions."

The Asean secretariat has no such mechanism, he says, by way of explaining an essential difference between the two, adding that the EU's supra national institutions had a mandate of their own.

"They are independent of the individual member states. We have the EC which is the executive body and the legislative which is a combination of the Council of Ministers and the European Parliament."

The Council of Ministers functions under the council of the heads of government which convenes at least once in six months, he says almost as if reciting from a mental text.

Heads of mission of EU member states continue to deal with Malaysia on issues that are still under their national control with regular meetings with Rommel for co-ordination purposes.

Rommel admits to a very easy and constructive relationship with his fellow European ambassadors and high commissioners.

"In this sense, we complement each other and we never walk on each other's turf," he says with the colourful turn of phrase that has punctuated the interview.

Initially, the design of the EU in the 1950s was aimed at bringing about regional co-operation and integration and lasting peace in Western Europe which had gone through "a scenery of war and strife for ages".

As he gears up to proceed to the next point, a flitting thought comes to mind which he feels important enough to vocalise: "Dr Mahathir (former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad) has often reminded us of this. I told him (Dr Mahathir) so at a meeting on July 31 that the phenomenon of the EU treaty is a historical event for Western Europe and is seen today as irreversibly turning the page on this millennium-long history of war."

Calling this the grand design which included plans for economic prosperity and stability on the rubble of World War II, he says a mechanism soon came about to facilitate this plan of action and there the story of the European Commission began.

He draws a parallel between the EU and Asean in that the Bali Summit for the first time spoke of an economic community in the offing in Southeast Asia, a virtual impossibility not too long ago due to vested interests of member nations.

Rommel is quick to add that the EU does not want to position itself as a model for any one grouping and that emulation should be a natural process and not one dictated by the Europeans.

"The EU may offer lessons for other groupings (like Asean) going down the same route, but we do not want to pretend that we are a model. In some respects, we have failed and we have succeeded in many more areas."

How successful has the euro (the common currency for most of the member states) been?

Again, it appears that this is a topic close to his heart and on which he has much to talk about.

"There is a very manifest interest in the euro in the international financial market. Last year, it was the new kid on the block. It is the cherry on the single-market cake. It appears that it is here to stay."

He is planning a regional conference next year with Bank Negara Malaysia

to explain "to practitioners in the real world on what the euro can bring to them".

The use of the euro can be beneficial to Malaysia, he says, even if the ringgit is pegged to the US dollar as the value of the euro keeps changing.

And this is a challenge even to Malaysia. And that, in itself, is an element of risk or money-making or cost-minimising.

For example, he cites the case of central banks of Asia with more than a trillion of foreign exchange reserves in dollars.

"Only 20 per cent of their trade involve using the US dollar. So if the value of the dollar falls, the purchasing power falls, too. But the banks have to avoid the risk. Malaysian companies borrow on the international financial markets. So the euro is really a new phenomenon that allow banks and others to hedge their positions."

It is difficult to wean him off the overall topic of the EU's genesis and conceptual design to a more topical explanation of the organisation's role in Malaysia.

Yet, midway into the hour-long interview, it is evident that Rommel has the rare skill of the few who can give life and breath to often dry academic topics like economic models and theories with a healthy infusion of enthusiasm and drive.

How does he see Malaysia in the larger international economic and political perspective?

"When I look at Malaysia from the perspective of domestic issues and priorities, what I have heard is a very strong commitment to Vision 2020 and to develop a knowledge-based and competitive economy in new niches.

"Malaysia needs to remain competitive. It needs to develop human resources, state-of-the-art technology and education. As a trading nation, it is a rare country where exports and imports represent much more than the gross domestic product."

Rommel is an ardent adherent of the two-way flow of communication between the EU and Malaysia.

"Malaysia is an interesting manifestation of racial integration. You have economic stability and goodwill among the races. In a way, this is what we are being challenged to do in the EU."

The EC ambassador wants to do his bit in enhancing the diplomatic relationship by way of match-making in business, curriculum development and human resources, sharing of environmental technology and a whole range of practices acceptable to Malaysia.

It appears that work consumes the envoy with every available opportunity devoted to it.

What then is his normal day like?

He generally has his hands full very early in the day, attending to the myriad of responsibilities that come with his job.

Fourteen-hour days are not unfamiliar to the bespectacled and balding six-footer who admits to "leaving the office at almost midnight last night as I had some things to take care of".

"In the day, I have to go to receptions and meetings. This is actually good as I get to meet Malaysian businessmen and people from the administration and it becomes part of my official duties.

"It is often a substitute for a meeting and you don't have to go to their office to do business."

He keeps nights free for office work and communication with headquarters in Brussels where bureaucrats are just getting into stride for the day because of the time difference.

Clearly, Rommel is more the typical 21st century businessman than a diplomat: always looking for opportunities to work smart, milking every

encounter for intrinsic dividends.