

New Dutch envoy wants to boost ties with RI

Veeramalla Anjaiah
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The Netherlands's new Ambassador to Indonesia, Nikolaos van Dam, is passionate about his job despite having lived in some of the world's hottest spots before being transferred to Indonesia.

"My residence in Beirut came under attack from Israeli tanks. Luckily, I escaped but my belongings were destroyed. Still I keep one book — which has a hole in it from a piece of shrapnel — with me as a memory," van Dam, who submitted his credentials to President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono on Sept. 8, 2005, told *The Jakarta Post* recently.

"I love my vocation, despite all its risks, challenges and dangers."

Most people equate a diplomat's vocation with the good life; a little public speaking, a few rounds of golf, being seen at cocktail parties; that sort of thing.

But while van Dam admits the life of an ambassador is a privileged one, his own diplomatic career has hardly been an easy ride — and he prefers it that way.

An academic-turned-career diplomat, he has served in places like Beirut, Baghdad, Tripoli, the Palestinian occupied territories and Ankara under difficult circumstances. He likes birds and mountaineering, but does not play golf.

Fascinated by the Middle East, after first studying Arabic at high school, the 60-year old van Dam is a life-long student of Arabic studies, with a Ph.D degree in politi-

cal science, specializing in Middle Eastern affairs. He now writes prolifically in Dutch, Arabic, German and English — with half a dozen books and numerous published articles — and also speaks French.

With a love for Islamic history, culture, especially Syrian affairs, van Dam wrote a Ph.D thesis: "The Role of Sectarianism, Regionalism and Tribalism in the Struggle for Political Power in Syria (1961-1976)" and a book *The Struggle for Power in Syria, Politics and Society under Asad and the Ba'th Party*, which was published in English, Arabic and Turkish.

"The English version of my book is being used as a text book in universities. My book

was even banned by the Syrian government," he says.

Van Dam's academic career began with a teaching job at the University of Amsterdam in 1970 and he joined the foreign service in 1975.

"By accident, I became a diplomat. Actually, I wanted to pursue my academic career. But I ended up as a diplomat. It was a good opportunity to see the things as they are in the field."

His first overseas posting was in Beirut (1980-1983) as First Secretary. "It was a good, as well as a bad experience. At the time of the Israeli attack on Beirut, I was the Charge d'Affaires. I evacuated Dutch citizens and I stayed there until the last moment. I learned my first lessons in the

art of diplomacy," van Dam said.

After serving as Charge d'Affaires in Tripoli from 1983 to 1985 and deputy director for African and Middle Eastern Affairs (1985-1988) at the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, van Dam became Ambassador and was posted to another trouble spot, Baghdad, in 1988.

"I witnessed the end of the Iran-Iraq war and the beginning of the First Gulf War in 1991. I dealt with the hostage crisis in which several Dutch citizens were taken as hostages. My experiences in war zones were useful as background to my later postings in Cairo (1991-1996) and Turkey."

This dangerous work did not go unrecognized, with van Dam becoming a Knight in the Order of Orange Nassau in 1983 and Officer in the Order of Orange Nassau in 1991 for his achievements in Lebanon and Iraq.

More recognition came when in 1999, the Dutch government appointed him as an Ambassador to Germany.

With Asia set to become a major political and economic hub, the Dutch government has recently been stepping up efforts to strengthen its centuries-old relationship with Indonesia, with Dutch Foreign Minister Bernard Bot, who was born in Batavia, visiting Jakarta four times in the past 11 months.

Bot is said to have wanted an adept diplomat and an expert on Islamic affairs as the Dutch ambassador in Jakarta, and van Dam more than fits the bill.

Currently hard at work

learning Indonesian, when he was asked about his main mission in Indonesia, van Dam said he would concentrate on boosting economic, political and cultural ties.

"My main mission will be to give momentum to the improving ties between the Netherlands and Indonesia. We will extend our cooperation to all future aspects of the relationship between the two countries."

He had also not ruled out writing a book on Indonesia, but said it was too early to make any promises yet.

"I have to know more about Indonesia in all its aspects. That's why I am learning the Indonesian language. Later, I will think about it."



NIKOLAOS VAN DAM

JP/Arief Suhardiman