

The Jakarta Post, 29 July 2010

Indonesia was the peak of my career: Dutch envoy

Lilian Budianto and Abdul Khalik, The Jakarta Post, Jakarta | Thu, 07/29/2010 10:19 AM |

A career diplomat who has served 22 years in various Muslim-majority countries, van Dam won the hearts of the local Muslim population here, who may have felt uneasy at the fact that Indonesia had once been colonized by the Dutch.

His fluent Indonesian, Arabic and his comprehensive understanding of Islam obtained from academic study and direct experience, helped van Dam form sincere ties with many people here.

Van Dam told The Jakarta Post he had made frequent visits to other provinces to get to know local Muslims, including a visit to Jombang in East Java, home to the largest Muslim organization in Indonesia, Nahdlatul Ulama.

Thus, when controversy surrounding the launch of an anti-Islam movie by Dutch lawmaker Geert Wilders surfaced in 2008, van Dam was more than ready to face outraged Muslim community here, explaining he disagreed with the movie and that it did not represent the Dutch people or government.

“I explained to them that the majority of the parliament and the government were against the movie. Wilder might defend himself on grounds of freedom of expression but he also has to respect Muslim people,” he said.

Van Dam said his time in Indonesia was among the most challenging placements he has had as a diplomat, especially since it was colonized by the Dutch for more than three centuries.

“Surprisingly, I found Indonesians very friendly and they do not harbor feelings of hatred toward [the Dutch]. If I may compare, Arab people have been very critical of their former colonizer. But people here welcomed me,” he said.

During van Dam’s five-year tenure in Indonesia, relations between the two countries have grown from love-hate relations into love-love relations.

Relations took a new turn in 2005 when the Dutch government finally expressed regret over its “police actions” in the late 1940s and recognized Indonesia’s independence day as Aug. 17, 1945.

Previously, the Dutch had officially recognized Indonesia’s independence date as Dec. 27, 1949 — the day it formally transferred sovereignty to Indonesia.

“So, I arrived when the sky was all blue,” van Dam said.

Since then, both countries have enjoyed a big boom in relations.

“Indonesia is very significant for us because it is our gateway to Asia, and for Indonesia, the Netherlands is a gateway to Europe,” he said.

Indonesia has faced many challenges entering the European market because of its inability to meet their import standards.

Indonesian shrimp, fish and sea products were once restricted from entering the EU, and Indonesian airlines have been banned from European aerospace — each for failure to meet European standards.

During this time of crisis the Netherlands worked with Indonesia to make necessary adjustments, resulting in the scrapping of the flight ban and import restrictions this year.

With the rise of Asia as a new economic power, Indonesia's economic clout has also grown, which in turn has benefitted the flourishing ties on many fronts between Jakarta and The Hague.

In 2009, bilateral trade stood at US\$3.405 billion.

The Netherlands provides around 200 scholarships every year to Indonesian students, and among European countries the Netherlands has hosted the most Indonesian students. The Netherlands Embassy in Jakarta is its second-largest after the one in Washington.

Van Dam said the historic links between the Netherlands and Indonesia had helped both countries in terms of people-to-people contact.

“The Dutch people are familiar with Indonesia, as many have Indonesian relatives,” he said. One of the Netherlands' leading soccer players, Giovanni van Bronckhorst, has Indonesian blood.

Indonesia will be van Dam's final post as the seasoned diplomat will retire soon.

“Indonesia has been the peak of my career,” he said.

The father of four already has plans for his retirement, including sharing stories about Indonesia with the world.

Van Dam plans to write about Indonesia, its culture and society, and would start with articles that may turn into a book.

He described Indonesia as having a unique Muslim community, diversified culture, good food and an archipelago with 17,000 islands.

Van Dam, whose expertise is in modern history of the Middle East, published several books while serving as ambassador to Germany, Turkey, Egypt and Iraq. He served most of his academic and diplomatic career in the Arab world, also covering Libya, Lebanon, Jordan and the Palestinian occupied territories.

“After I retire I will have more time to read books and I also plan to teach at universities,” he said.

As an ambassador, van Dam has been actively engaged in efforts to promote an understanding in the West of life in Muslim communities, and has published a number of articles in media to this end.

“In the past in Europe, the view of Muslims and Islam was heavily influenced by stereotypes, which emanated from the conflicts between Christian and Muslim rulers in the Middle Ages. But today's situation in the West has developed further and is different,” van Dam said.

Sabam Siagian assisted with and contributed to this story