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Envoy with an undying mission

When Paul Bekkers, the Dutch envoy to Malaysia, talks, it is not just about bilateral relations. He also shares his country's successful policies in curtailling the drugs and HIV/AIDS scourge.

PAUL GABRIEL

IN looks and demeanour, Paul Bekkers is the quintessential diplomat. But with one exception – it's not the usual elite script when the Dutch Ambassador to Malaysia opens up when in conversation.

The six-footer shares intense personal experiences of his travels around the world – trying to find an answer to the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

In a previous role as the Netherlands' Special Ambassador for HIV/AIDS, Bekkers was entrusted with the task of helping other countries find ways to contain the spread of the disease and also grapple with health concerns like tuberculosis and malaria.

It is one of two thematic ambassadorial posts in the Netherlands; the other being human rights.

Bekkers, 48, explains the rationale behind his government creating the post he held for four years before his posting to Malaysia.

"If a country hard hit by the epidemic does not address the HIV/AIDS issue, it will not have any future.

"The most vulnerable segment is the young adults aged between 15 and 29, and this is worldwide," he begins.

"If a girl contracts the disease, she will die about six years on. At that time she would have been a productive part of society, often a mother. And she is quite likely to have become a teacher, nurse or farmer.

"If society is going to be robbed of her services, then you are going to have a big problem developing that country.

"In Swaziland, the HIV/AIDS rate is 40%. In South Africa, the epidemic is also severe – at about 10%."

The Netherlands, a wealthy nation with the world's largest port and a well-developed, but picturesque, people who sometimes still wear clogs and ride bicycles, is one of several countries which have an HIV/AIDS ambassador as part of its Foreign Service.

The others include Norway, Sweden, France, Spain, Australia, the United States and Indonesia, where First Lady Ani Yudhoyono fills in.

Working with the facts

Bekkers reveals that studies showed 85% of people with HIV/AIDS contracted the virus through sex, with the remainder infected through the exchange of tainted needles.

In Afghanistan, Iran, Ukraine and parts of Eastern Europe, the epidemic spreads mainly through the use of tainted needles, he says.

"In some countries, you see a decline in cases while in others, there is a rise which is

mostly due to the exchange of tainted needles, as in Malaysia and Indonesia.

"Some people don't have access to clean needles but they are addicted so they end up being infected using tainted ones," he notes.

Bekkers recalls gripping encounters with victims of AIDS during his travels to the backwaters of Africa as the HIV/AIDS Ambassador.

"The only way to know is to see the conditions first-hand. I can tell you the story of a 19-year-old girl who was a prostitute in Zambia. For an extra 20 cents, she offered sex without the client having to use a condom.

"I asked her why, when chances of contracting HIV was very high, she said it didn't make any difference what would happen to her in six to seven years when she was unsure of her fate the week after. So it is fundamentally a poverty problem there," he laments.

The envoy speaks with something akin to spiritual gratitude when he says he has also seen "beautiful things" in his sojourns.

"There were grandmothers in villages in South Africa and Swaziland taking care of not only their own but 30 to 40 other children who lost their parents to AIDS. There were villages whose entire adult population was wiped out.

"The good and impressive thing is that there are social structures in these villages where the elders take care of the young," he reveals.

Bekkers' powerful narrative continues as he explains the drug policies of the Netherlands developed in the 1970s, which he says has successfully curtailed the drugs and HIV/AIDS scourge.

It is the most densely populated country in Europe (more than 16 million people living in a country one-eighth the size of Malaysia).

"Our policies are designed to be pragmatic, humane, realistic and based on scientifically supported facts.

"Dutch law makes a distinction between soft and hard drugs due to the different health risks," he explains.

Although drugs are illegal in the Netherlands, the use of drugs in the kingdom is not a criminal offence.

Detecting and prosecuting for possession of drugs for personal use (in general 0.5g, and no more than 5g for soft drugs such as cannabis) is a low priority.

Criminal proceedings are instigated in cases where between 5g and 30g of drugs are found, depending on the circumstances of the offence.

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Bekkers, a Christian whose interests include religion and the Church, explains the drug-HIV/AIDS connection and his government's remedy to the malady.

"Five years ago, we had seven (HIV/AIDS) transmissions via drug use. Then it was reduced to two cases and now there are zero cases.

"It is the lowest ever anywhere in the world and it has been due to our comprehensive package of dealing with the problem," he shares, saying the core principle was that addicts in the Netherlands were not treated as criminals but as patients who needed care and treatment.

"We do our best to get them to kick the drug habit, which is not necessarily by keeping them in prison," he stresses.

Asked about Amsterdam's "sin city of the world" tag where marijuana and cocaine use is perceived to be widespread together with myriad innovative ways to sell sex, Bekkers makes no diplomatic dodge.

"Every country has its own perception, but here are the facts," he says.

"We have the lowest teenage pregnancy and abortion rate (in the world), the lowest transmission of HIV from sex and drug use, and a low number of young people actually using drugs.

"Other countries, for example the United States, have a much higher percentage in all these areas.

"It confirms our approach ... there is evidence that the way we address these problems is successful. Not because we think it is good but because the facts are there," contends Bekkers, who served four years (1994-98) in South Africa as cultural, press and environmental attaché.

A successful approach

But what is it about the negative perception involving Holland's capital? Now, Bekkers finds it really hard to curb his impatience to clear the air!

"People who visit Amsterdam go to a tiny little corner where there is prostitution, which is condoned. But it is a very small thing.

"The use of soft drugs is condoned if a very small amount is involved. Because of this strategy, there is a very low number of people actually making the move from soft to hard drugs. That's important as hard drugs kill.

"Our policy has led to very positive figures. Because of our approach, there is hardly any HIV transmission. In many other countries, you see an increase because their approach is less successful than ours. So what more evidence do you need?"

He compares the scenario with Indonesia, which he visited as HIV/AIDS Ambassador, where countless persons were in prison for drug offences and many were getting infected with HIV.

"The number of HIV-positive persons in prisons there sky-rockets and then they return to society and this is a sure way to further spread the virus."

Bekkers, whose three children were born in Pretoria during his stint there, says the best way forward in dealing with the drug problem and HIV/AIDS is through "education, prevention, treatment and harm reduction", as it is done in the Netherlands.

"The most vital is information and prevention. It is important to discourage young people from turning to drugs.

"But if people do become addicted, then a good range of treatment is provided to cure them.

"If they need to use a needle, we make sure it's a clean needle. We also offer them a facility where they can do it (use drugs) in a cleaner environment, with access to healthcare so that they can test themselves and know if they have been infected.

"There are care options available that are intended to improve the health of addicts in the Netherlands. All these have led to zero transmission of HIV," he says, adding that Iran has also taken a similar approach of harm reduction which is the official policy of UNAIDS.

Asked how he intended to put his experiences to good use as the Ambassador to Malaysia, the anti-AIDS crusader responds: "If you have worked in this area, you will never let go, or it will never let you go, because you have seen the devastating impact of HIV/AIDS.

"I will always have a special interest in this issue and would like to offer my services, knowledge and experience to Malaysians.

"I have already requested for a meeting with the Health Minister and will definitely want to co-operate," he says.

On his new role, Bekkers speaks of his continuing "learning curve".

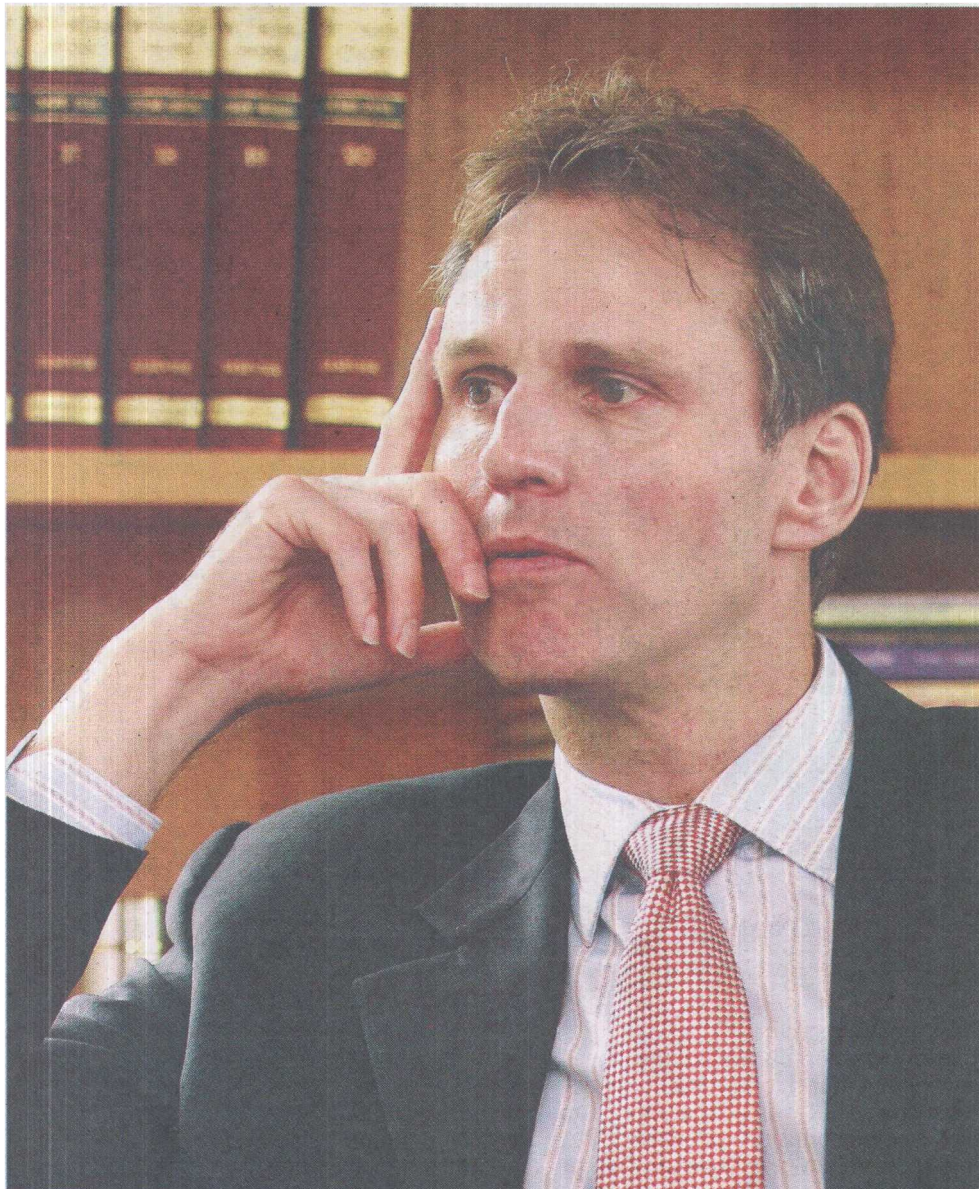
"The Netherlands can learn from the wonderful composition of Malaysia, where people of different ethnic backgrounds live together in harmony," he concludes.

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**PAUL BEKKERS
THE NETHERLANDS ENVOY TO MALAYSIA**

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His ideal role: Bekkers, who has vast experience in curbing the spread of HIV/AIDS, is hoping to share his expertise with Malaysia during his stint here as the Dutch envoy.