

RI, RUSSIA POISED TO FOSTER EDUCATION COOPERATION

by Beau Donelly

Jakarta, Jan 20 (ANTARA) - Deputy Chief Representative of Indonesia in Moscow, Antonius Agus Sriyono, encouraged academic exchange between Russia and Indonesia here Tuesday.

Less than a week after the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between University of Indonesia (UI) and the Russia Polytechnic University of St. Petersburg was signed, Mr. Sriyono discussed closer ties between the two countries in a bid to further secure bilateralism.

"It is time to encourage the relationship between the two countries especially in the field of education. That's why we ask the Indonesian students to visit Russia and we provide scholarships both from the Russian government and also from the Indonesian government," he said.

Sriyono explained his duty to inform Indonesians about modern Russia compared to the old Soviet Union.

"The new [Russian] government do believe in democracy. I don't see any difficulties in understanding the new Russia. We have to avoid the stigma and the perception that Russia is Communist," he said.

The agreement will see the two-way exchange of students, lecturers and academic materials of undergraduate, postgraduate and masters' degrees.

OBAMA'S PRIMARY SCHOOL CELEBRATES INAUGURATION

by Beau Donnelly

Jakarta, Jan 21 (ANTARA) - Nestled in a quiet street in Menteng, central Jakarta, State Elementary School (SDN) 01 celebrated Barack Obama's inauguration as the 44th president of the US. The basketball court, just a few steps away from classroom 3B where Obama spent one of his three years as a student, was converted to host the event for over one hundred guests. Outside the main gate of the school, entrepreneur Liansatri sold t-shirts picturing Obama for Rp 25,000. On the back was the phrase: "Change We Can Believe In."

Inside, US Ambassador to Indonesia Cameron Hume wished the new president well and credited the school for providing his early education. "In this year of crisis, when Americans look for a leader, they wanted a leader who had a sense of personal reserve, a leader who conveys that he would think before he acted, a leader who was sensitive to people from different backgrounds," he said. "I personally believe that those are skills we can see in that man, in large part because of his experience here at this school and I think that Americans have a reason to be grateful," he added.

His Excellency went on to praise the Indonesian culture. "I think that we should be comfortable in the occurrence that it is a person who was able to spend important years of his life here and to learn the wisdom that is evident in Indonesian society and the confidence that a person who benefited from that wisdom is in a position to lead us," he said.

Remembered by teachers as a courteous boy who waited until his friends finished their afternoon prayers before going out to lunch, Obama was honoured by retired principle Tine Hahijary and a traditional Indonesian 'Gambang Kromong' musical performance. Eleven year old Alifa Salsabila, who sang as part of the festivities, praised Obama for his kindness. "He is very, very smart and I hope he is a good president to the people," she said.

Hopes of a shift in the perception of the Muslim world have dominated Obama's rise to the Presidency. In his inaugural address in Washington DC, Obama spoke of mutual interest and respect between religions as the only way forward.

Obama's former classmate, Colonel Danardono, described the inauguration ceremony as an unbelievable event in history. "I hope that he can fulfil what his citizens hope and also internationally. Then we can build a natural understanding between the United States and Indonesia," he said.

Another classmate of Obama's, Dewi Asmara Oetojo, spoke of how proud she was to have once known the president. "This is a celebration for the people. A win for the people," she said.

US Ambassador Cameron Hume neither confirmed nor denied that President Obama will visit Indonesia this year as predicted. "I hope and expect that Barack Obama will be able to come to Indonesia this year. So far its 12:30 at night on the day of his election. He's doing what we're doing; He's celebrating. He hasn't had time to tell me what his travel plans are," he said.

PUPPETRY: TOOL FOR DIPLOMACY?

by Beau Donelly

Jakarta, Jan 26 - RI Foreign Affairs Minister Hassan Wirajuda called for peace among all nations in his address to over one hundred and fifty guests in the Ruang Nusantara Room at the Foreign Affairs Ministry here Thursday following a traditional Indonesian puppetry performance.

The fourth annual Pejambon Coffee event welcomed Asean Puppetry Association members and over 60 foreign ambassadors. Hassan used the forty minute Javanese puppetry performance, entitled 'A Marta Vs. Giringdraja,' as the prelude to delivering Indonesia's Foreign Policy Statement.

The fictional play told the story of a king who conquered neighbouring territories and pointed to the need for today's occupying countries to restore independence in a bid to achieve world peace. Hassan, who stated that Wayang (Indonesian puppetry) is an important instrument for diplomacy began his speech by talking about the conflict in Gaza.

"The stories represent our life; the battle between good and evil. We need to identify the message and understand it in the context of our profession as diplomats. More than a thousand innocent civilians have been killed. We have all witnessed these killings. The rest of the world has become a mere spectator," he said.

Asean Puppetry Association Secretariat, Tujuk Sutrisno, described the relevance of the performance to the global environment. "It's about the goodies and the badies," he said. "The goodies always win," he added.

FM Hassan advocated international unity during the global economic crisis. Backing the success of diplomatic relations last year, he said that climate change, energy shortages and the financial crisis would require international solutions.

"We need to solve past problems and cooperate together for a better future," he said.

The show was narrated by Ki Bagong Darmono and included traditional Javanese song performed by American singer Elizabeth Sekararum.

THE 30-YEAR CAREER OF A ROADSIDE TIRE REPAIRMAN

by Beau Donnelly

Amirudin dropped out of school in the sixth grade. At age twelve his parents bought him a brand new Robin air compressor and he set up shop on Wahid Hasyim Street in Central Jakarta as a tyre repair man, known locally as a 'tukang tambal ban'.

Thirty years later, Amirudin still sits under a faded yellow and orange beach umbrella and hopes there are enough punctures in the day to support his wife, two children and parents. On most days, the ten or so customers who employ his services, at Rp5000–Rp6000 (USD0.43-0.52) per hole, afford his family their basic lifestyle. Some days, however, Amirudin only receives a couple of customers, earning him an income of approximately USD\$1.50.

"I've never tried to do another job. My greatest accomplishment is that I can support my wife and kids. As long as they're happy and I can feed them, I'm happy. Tyre repairing is a suitable job for me and I'm very satisfied with my business," he says.

At seven o'clock in the morning, six days a week, Amirudin travels five minutes by foot from the house he and his three sisters were born in to his patch of council pavement that he shares with a pharmacy car park.

Amirudin says he's lucky to have this spot. Within a few hundred meters of the cement floor he calls an office there are two more tyre repair men, but their work stations sit awkwardly on the edge of the footpath and provide little room to move around.

For sixteen hours a day, Amirudin breaths thick exhaust fumes that spill from the chaotic hustle of vehicles; each one competing for an inch of the four-lane road, relying on confidence more than skill. His only shield, a Mango tree that's been there as long as him.

Tukang tambal ban, like Amirudin, are permanent fixtures on the streets of Jakarta, scattered along main roads they make up the sea of street vendors selling everything from newspapers and instant coffee (kept in a thermos' on the back of bicycles) to local delicacies like sweet martabak and warm chestnuts.

He's also lucky because he pays no rent - officially or unofficially. Street vending is illegal in Jakarta, although deals are often struck between council workers and merchants. To complicate matters, crime syndicates operate on the streets, demanding payment for use of the land. But Amirudin has free rent and an open lease, a benefit of having one job for your whole life.

"I don't pay anyone because I'm a senior and a local. Usually, other people have to pay about Rp25000 or a packet of cigarettes per week," he says.

While businesses around the world are suffering from the effects of the slowing economy, Amirudin claims he has had no downturn in trade. Slipping under the economic radar, this low return business is also low risk.

When asked if he knew anything about the nails that appear scattered across the roads in the city, a known method that tukang tambal ban use for drumming up extra business, Amirudin's uneasy laugh turned into a broad smile.

“No, no, no,” he says. “This road is quite safe with no booby traps. They usually do it at Kwitang [Senen sub-district] or under the Semangi fly over [South Jakarta]. Not here”, he insists.

He says the only danger he faces in his line of work are nails stabbing his fingers. Judging by the uncreased surface of his hands, there's not much evidence of that happening. He makes repairing a punctured tyre look easy.

Squatting beside the motorbike, Amirudin loosens the bolts on the inside of the wheel and removes the inner tyre. He reaches above his head for the air compressor hose that suspends from an S-shaped hook, hanging from the mango tree. After filling the tyre with air, he dunks it in stale rain water that is in an old five liter kerosene tank, cut in half and laid flat on the pavement. When air bubbles pierce the polluted film on the surface, he transfers the limp rubber from the tank to the ground.

Wasting no time, Amirudin reaches for his most important tool; a piece of wood the size of blackboard duster, wrapped in the gritty metal that was once a cheese grater. The back and forward motion is harsh on the rubber and strips off thin layers around the puncture, making the area more adhesive.

Amirudin reaches for a rubber component, depending on the size of the puncture, from a rusty Godang Goram 50 Filter cigarette tin. A dollop of tar-like paste, made from a combination of old rubber and kerosene, is skillfully applied to the coarse surface of the tyre. The rubber component is positioned over the black glue and the tyre is fastened into a homemade clamp.

Unscrewing the cap from an old Pocari Sweat bottle, Amirudin pours about thirty millimeters of kerosene into the chamber at the bottom of the clamp. With the flick of a match the blue flame melts rubber to rubber and the pungent smell dissolves into Jakarta's moist air, adding to the cocktail of odors that define the city. After pumping up the tyre with the air compressor that runs on two liters of gasoline per week (Rp9000), the customer is ready to get back out to the rat-race that is Jakarta's roads. The whole process takes just over ten minutes.

Amirudin has no plans to change his vocation. He's content that he'll never be the motorbike mechanic he dreamed of being as a child, although he doesn't want the same fate for his son.

“I want a better life for my son. I'll do the hard work now so my children can have a good future and an easier life than I did,” he says