Very relevant lecture on Curaçao conflict potential

THE HAGUE—Considering the political developments in Curaçao, the lecture of Director of the Institute for Societal Resilience (ISR) of the Amsterdam Free University VU Joris Rijbroek in The Hague on Thursday could not have been more relevant.

The lecture, titled “Caribbean conflict potential in the Kingdom; resilience, security and trust in Curaçao,” was originally planned for December 1 last year, but had to be postponed last minute for logistical reasons. About a month ago it was decided to reschedule the lecture at the Ministry of Home Affairs and Kingdom Relations BZK for Thursday.

Rijbroek’s inability to attend the original lecture due to limited train services on December 1 turned out to be a blessing because the topic of his lecture had become highly current two and a half months later with the fall of the Koeiman cabinet, mounting tension in the Dutch Parliament and the threat of a new round of strikes in the Netherlands.

Rijbroek, a former lecturer at the Nijmegen Radboud University who has also worked for the Municipality Amsterdam and the Dutch Government, has visited the islands numerous times since his wife is of Curacaoan-Venezuelan descent.

During his visits to Curaçao, a number of things struck him as a resilience and conflict situation expert which led him to further research. Resilience is under pressure with people feeling less secure due to crime, the diminishing confidence in the local government, greater distrust among the people – all potential ingredients for a conflict situation.

Curaçao is a small island facing immense challenges and limited economic perspectives. At the same time it is feeling the adverse effects of the unstable situation in neighbouring Venezuela. The new deal with the Chinese Guangdong Zhenrong Energy company and the future of the Island refinery is adding further pressure.

Rijbroek sketched the characteristics of the societies with a conflict potential. Difficult circumstances of living, reasons for misery are attributed to other groups in society, societies that harbour a group thinking/anger and subsequent victimisation, unequal economic development and a decreasing trust in government.

These characteristics don’t have to necessarily lead to a conflict, but they can be triggers, and as such it is important to keep an eye on them to avoid a sudden conflict, said Rijbroek. He mentioned the May 30, 1969 riots in Curaçao that were the result of an escalated labour dispute fed by discontent among the working class. Authorities made every effort to prevent an escalation of the general strike in 2016.

Also, contributing factors to conflict potential are discrimination and (the perception of) injustice, such as the limited relations between the Caraçaoans and the Dutch expat/pensionado. “These communities are living complete separate lives. There is no exchange of thoughts which creates rumours and the ‘we-them’ thinking,” said Rijbroek.

The presence of the colonial past is still felt and sometimes leads to incidents. Then there is the Isla refinery, which has always been a source of concern, not only the pollution that it causes, but also because certain, vulnerable groups in society suffer more from this pollution than others. The future of the refinery is unclear and has people worried.

The migration from Venezuela to Curaçao is felt as an increasing problem and causes fear among some parts of society. People from Curaçao over the years have migrated as well, mainly to the Netherlands, in some periods in massive numbers with peak moments being the departure of Shell and the austerity measures of the government.

Research of resilience and conflict potential in the Netherlands has shown that the inter-action of politics/government with the citizens is highly important, creating a vital local democracy with citizen participation. Municipalities where this is the case have a higher level of accepting refugees for example.

The Netherlands has a lot of know-how on dealing with diminished confidence that citizens have in their government, the increased reservations between groups within society and societal tension. Rijbroek would like to see that know-how shared with Curaçao. He said this know-how should be shared on the basis of equality, avoiding a situation where the Netherlands tells the island what to do.

Rijbroek proposed a strategy of living complete separate lives. There is no exchange of thoughts which creates rumours and the ‘we-them’ thinking. Soft approach is aimed at strengthening the coherence and social capital of the society, avoiding a situation where the Netherlands tells the island what to do.

The soft approach is based on setting the limits: an equal application of the law for all, investing in law and order, tackling criminal behaviour and preventing discrimination and intolerant behaviour.

Action is needed to start up this joint initiative within the Kingdom. “Don’t wait until it is too late. As the saying goes: one should close the roof when the sun is shining,” Rijbroek told the audience.

The lecture was well attended and included the new Deputy Minister Plenipotentiary of St. Maarten Hassani Ellis who very recently took up his job in The Hague.