AAFICS represents retired officials from the United Nations and its agencies and funds. Former officials of other international organizations are also welcome to become members. We offer a link to UN retirees through occasional social events, as well as contacts for information and advice about retirement in Australia. We are affiliated to FAFICS in Geneva, the Federation of 63 Associations similar to ours and an essential source of advice on pension-related issues and on after-service-health insurance schemes. This newsletter has been prepared and circulated on a voluntary basis by the AAFICS membership.

EDITOR’S NOTE: Dear AAFICS friends. This is our second and final edition for 2019, so the obligatory images of holly and poinciana are on display to get a bit of festive spirit in play and to indicate that the Christmas season is upon us. (As if you didn’t know.) This month, we have gathered another fine selection of contributions for the Newsletter from members and this input is, of course, hugely appreciated. Thank you to those you have sent articles, especially State Coordinators who never let us down. There is a most erudite piece on the Prime Minister’s outburst on ‘negative globalism’ from our eminent AAFICS member, Ramesh Thakur, and a magnificent travel tale from AAFICS Victoria member, Peter Steele. If you have ever felt like driving a motorbike through Africa, Peter’s story will help you decide. Personal stories about UN life abound and these add richness to our Newsletter. The 2019 membership drive was, as we reported earlier, hugely successful and we thank Mike and the Victoria team for the hard work in preparing publicity material and getting the message out to newly retired UN personnel who consider Australia as their home. Welcome to all those colleagues who are now part of the AAFICS community. Please enjoy this edition of your Newsletter. When compiling the publication, I scan back through all my incoming e-mails and nervously wonder if I have been able to gather every article everyone has sent. If you have sent one and don’t see it in print, please let me know. Season’s greetings to all and may 2020 bring peace and joy to the world...

PRESIDENT’S REPORT: JENNIFER ASHTON

It has been a busy six months since I last wrote, as I have been to wonderful AAFICS lunches in Hobart (the very first of its kind) and the Sunshine Coast, Queensland thanks to Jane, Mike and Eileen, as well as the annual FAFICS Council meeting in Vienna. All this with the Canberra lunch happening in December! And the pleasure of meeting there the Wingfields, who were founding members of AAFICS in 1981. Trips have reminded me just how large Australia is – Tasmania was cold
and drizzling, colonial sandstone buildings; the Sunshine Coast hot, tinder dry and smoky, overhead fans and huge timber verandahs. And Canberra smoky as well, with 100 bushfires raging around the country.

In family news, my son will return to Canberra after three years in Paris, as he has now secured a job at the ANU. This is much to my daughter’s relief as she will not be corralled for heavy gardening duties quite so much, but we are both a bit sad that we will no longer have the annual excuse for the Canberra winter retreat to France.

Now to news of the Pension Fund. UNJSPF has a new Pension Benefits Administrator, who will start work in January. She is a Canadian, Ms Rosemary McClean, who previously headed the Ontario Teachers’ Pension Plan. According to our Secretary-General, she was named one of the Most Powerful Women in Canada in 2008. Ms Janice Lee Dunn, who has been the acting CEO this year, is due to finish at the end of December.

The Pension Fund remains financially sound. There has been some criticism of the Office of Investment Management, emanating from a group of UN staff representatives on the Pension Board. For those who are interested, there is a 90-minute video of a meeting at UN New York in which the ASG in charge of the Office of Investment Management (OIM) presents achievements and responds to this criticism. It is available on www.unpensionblog.com and will take you back to the many, many meetings we have sat through as you watch staff nodding off, or consulting their phones in the background!

The Pension Fund has produced a fascinating report on sustainability and its investments (available on www.oim.unjspf.org). A key point for us Australians is that the Pension Fund decided in September that it will no longer make new investments in coal production and that it will divest from all existing coal production by the end of next year. This decision has been made on grounds of viability. Ethical and sustainable investment is a complex field. When you have a large portfolio,
diversified as much as possible to protect the overall standing of the investments, it is difficult to pinpoint individual companies for divestment (and, in fact, to determine what constitutes grounds for said divestment). Rather it seems to be more important to agree to general principles and standards which have been developed by international agreement and to utilise them.

I’ve also had a few anxious queries as to whether our pension funds (all $69billion of them) will be raided to meet some of the UN budget shortfall, which has been exacerbated by the (extreme) lateness of US contributions. Rest assured that the Pension Fund is a discrete entity, which cannot be touched for any other reason than to pay our pensions. According to Mary Johnson, font of all wisdom, there was a previous crisis in the Pension Fund in the 1980s which led to severe cost-cutting, but this was a result of internal mismanagement. Since then, the Pension Fund weathered the global fiscal crisis with little impact and remains relatively robust today.

The annual FAFICS meeting was held in Vienna this year. It had been planned for Nairobi, where the Pension Board was meeting, but a number of FAFICS members, most particularly those from West Africa, complained of the difficulty and time required to reach there. It is probably just as well that we met in a different location as the Pension Board gathering seems to have been rather ‘colourful’, with altercations between some staff representatives and the Chair. For anyone interested, I am happy to forward minutes of the Council to you. One of the major concerns of our European FAFICS colleagues has been what they see as the downgrading of the UNJSPF Office in Geneva. I know also that several of you who have dealt with both Geneva and New York, speak highly of the service of the former. The Acting CEO reported that as the Geneva Office was not meeting benchmarks at the same level as NY, it would be managed by NY.

To all of you, season’s greetings and a happy New Year.

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NEWS ABOUT MEMBERS

Stephen Hill AM (UNESCO)

Sincere thanks to Stephen Hill who has recently stepped aside as State Coordinator of AAFICS in NSW. Stephen has served for many years in this role and has shared, unstintingly, his great expertise with other AAFICS Coordinators across the country. Stephen is now intending to spend more time writing books (he already has several published) and, of course, sharing his academic knowledge as Emeritus Professor at the University of Wollongong. Thank you, Stephen! Your efforts have been hugely valued.
Maurice Critchley (UNOFFP)

Stepping into Stephen’s big shoes as AAFICS NSW Coordinator on an *ad interim* basis is Maurice Critchley (UNOFFP). Readers might recall Maurice’s cogent response (in our last Newsletter) to the review of the Hollywood film *Backstabbing for Beginners*, which documented a fictional account of the life of some of the people involved with the Oil for Food Programme. Maurice held a senior role with the UNOFFP in New York and was able to more accurately describe to us the enormous amount of complex UN work undertaken to make the whole project a reality. He also put paid to the Hollywood-style nonsense surrounding some of the characters in the movie. Welcome Maurice! Good luck with all your efforts representing NSW members of AAFICS.

Kate Gordon (UNHCR)

Kate and her mother, the remarkable 97-year-old Hope, joined other UN personnel and interested parties to commemorate UN Day on the 24th October 2019 in Sydney. The keynote speaker at the ceremony, held at the Cenotaph, was Nick Kaldos, the former NSW Deputy Police Commissioner who has most recently been working with the UN in The Lebanon. Kate kindly laid a wreath of blue and white flowers on behalf of retired former UN staff and in memory of those who sadly lost their lives on duty in various postings.

Tomi Petr (FAO)

Tomi and Mary Petr are Queensland AAFICS members and drove all the way from their home in Toowoomba to attend the AAFICS lunch on the Sunshine Coast. As someone who has shared a table with Tomi at two AAFICS luncheons, your Editor can attest to the fact that Tomi eloquently recounts wonderful tales of his time with the UN and during his youth in war-torn Europe. His current passion is writing books and he tells us that “One result of my working fifteen years in the Department of Fisheries of FAO in Rome was a shelf full of diaries. Transferred to computer they came to 1400
pages. The period covered is 1980 – 1995. These were used as a basis for writing several books. The first one is called *Walks in the Apennines and Old Etruria*, and it was published in 2018. The second, *Fishing Without a Rod*, will appear in the first half of 2020 and covers a selection of FAO fisheries missions in countries of Asia and the Pacific. The third, still in manuscript form, deals with everyday life in Rome. I regret to say that they are written in the Czech language and are, or will be, published in Prague.” Sincere thanks Tomi and good luck with all your writing endeavours.

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**THOUGHT FOR THE NEW YEAR 2020**

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**THOUGHT FOR THE NEW YEAR 2020**

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**THOUGHT FOR THE NEW YEAR 2020**

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WESTERN AUSTRALIA

AAFICS WA held their last social gathering for 2019 at Mantra on Murray Hotel’s Society Kitchen and Bar in Perth on 6 December 2019. Notwithstanding being a small group with 11 members (not all of whom were present on the occasion), or perhaps because of it, they revel in each other’s friendship, support and camaraderie.

They were joined by Sharon Van Buerle, former Secretary to the Fifth Committee of the UN General Assembly. Sharon is keen to join AAFICS and will become the 12th member of AAFICS WA. She looked forward to her full reintegration to Perth and enjoying what the city has to offer with all the changes that have taken place over the years. Of course, the one thing she would miss, as we all have, is the many friends and colleagues made in the UN.

Seated: Luckshmi Sunderam;
Standing left to right: Molly Baker, Irene Taylor, Sharon Van Buerle, Monina S. Magallanes, Bill Buchanan, and T. Siva Sunderam. (Photo courtesy WA team.)
We had a lively conversation at lunch covering topics such as the role of the Fifth Committee which is the Committee of the General Assembly responsible for administrative and budgetary matters. Based on the reports of the Fifth Committee, the General Assembly considers and approves the budget of the Organization in accordance with the matters relating to the financing of peacekeeping missions.

On that note, Sharon said that the budget of the UN Joint Staff Pension Fund was currently under consideration by the Fifth Committee, following its consideration mid-year by the Joint Staff Pension Board. It was expected that the General Assembly would conclude its consideration of the Pension Board report and the budget prior to the end of the year when a resolution would be adopted.

The serious financial situation faced by the United Nations was also discussed, given the various news articles about it, and the various economy measures put in place including shutting down escalators, not providing paper for the photocopy machines in the Dag Hammarskjold Library, limits on after hours on-site activities, etc. Further, the conversation touched on the evolving levels of influence by certain member states owing to the changes in their levels of contributions and how that impacted the Organization and how it operated.

All was not serious at lunch as it ended with a happy musical interlude at the nearby Wesley Uniting Church where there was a free music recital; a regular performance on the first and third Friday of every month at noon.

All in AAFICS WA wish everyone a very happy Christmas and a wonderful New Year 2020.

Monina Magallanes W.A. State Coordinator on behalf of the whole WA membership

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TASMANIA

An introduction to our new Tasmania State Coordinator, Dr. Jane Wilson:

I was educated in Hobart, at a school that encourages debating, acting, languages and a love of literature. Along the way, either at home or school, I was vividly struck by a documentary about the first three UN Secretaries-General - Norwegian Trygve Lie, Swedish Dag Hammarskjold and U Thant from Myanmar. Given that we had television from 1954 and that U Thant took over in 1961 when Dag Hammarskjold was killed on a peace mission to the Congo, it was probably during my early high school years. These global personalities were compelling. My copy of Hammarskjold’s *Markings*, based on his diaries, is always within reach.

After an unspectacular four years at university (Arts with Honours) I slid into teaching, later educational psychology and surprisingly into public health and policy analysis. My academic discipline is psychology, with a predilection for the nexus between theory and practice. A PhD was started in 2001. I morphed from education to health, from State to Federal government and finally stumbled into overseas development work through AusAID. I was part of late-night conference calls to Geneva when Australia was heavily involved in the formation of the new UN joint and co-sponsored programme on AIDS, known as UNAIDS.

Arriving in Indonesia as a policy advisor in 1993 involved a vast change of scale. I was immersed in bilateral perspectives through Australian and US HIV projects, interacting with Embassy staff, Government of Indonesia sectoral official, NGOs, people living with HIV and the UN. Moving from AusAID to USAID projects required a cultural shift as a well as a different style guide. Each donor
country had its own priorities and geographic focuses in Indonesia. The PhD was finally finished a decade after it was begun. The next step was a stint in the UN as Country Director for UNAIDS from 2001-2008. Immersed in Indonesia’s changing political systems from 1993-2008, I was exposed to the various perspectives of the international agencies represented in the country. Fifteen years in Indonesia was followed by a brief acting stint for UNAIDS in Uganda and three years as a Regional Gender and Human Rights Advisor for UNAIDS. UNAIDS was led initially by Peter Piot, followed by Michel Sidibe, both charismatic and driven. Policies to address HIV were often controversial, had to be evidence based, compelling to member states and convince donors. They were extraordinary years, with the 1997-8 Indonesian Financial Crisis and the 2004 Boxing Day earthquake and tsunami the most memorable. The UNAIDS years also involved regular working encounters with staff from the Breton Woods institutions.

Retiring from 2012 meant a return home and gradual reintegration. I signed up with AAFICS which helped with the transition from active service to retirement but felt rather isolated. The recent membership drive improved things considerably and there are now four of us in Tasmania. We held our first lunch meeting on 10 October, and discovered we were united by our disdain for the Prime Minister’s comments on ‘negative globalism’. We were chuffed that Jennifer came all the way to Hobart to meet us and agreed that we’d do what we could to promote a better understanding of the UN.

A chance meeting with a past teacher, the U3A Programme Coordinator in Hobart, led to an opportunity to give a lecture about the UN next March. It was a real shot in the arm when Jennifer told us about a Victorian AAFICS member from Warrnambool who is already lecturing to an enthusiastic U3A group. I am thinking more about my development work, hence this article, and it’s the people you never forget of course (the Norwegian WHO Representative, the Swedish UN Resident Coordinator and the Indonesian and Ugandan NGOs). I am enjoying reading my way through Steil’s The Battle of Breton Woods and Schlesinger’s Act of Creation, as I anticipate the first U3A encounter in March. It was Kierkegaard who said, “Life can only be understood backwards, but it must be lived forwards.”

Jane S. Wilson PhD, Tasmania State Coordinator

VICTORIA

Greetings from your colleagues in Victoria. Firstly, our sincere condolences to those in our northern States and areas affected by these awful bushfires. Thankfully, on the Melbourne side of the Great Divide we have had pretty cool and damp conditions, so have been spared those and that all-encompassing smoke haze that is so difficult to live with. I guess we just have to get used to our weather changes in Australia; easy to say but so difficult to do for those badly affected. However, trying to bring in a little frivolity, I received this email that describes how we are seeing our climate down here in Victoria:
With our annual AGM being held in May 2019 and having reported on this in the last (July 2019) Newsletter, we want to inform you of some of the follow-up activities from that meeting. Essentially there are four main items to report on as follows:

1. **Change in AAFICS, Victoria AGM Venue.** It was a unanimous decision that we should not continue to hold our AGM at the Melbourne Arts Centre café due to the high background noise level. After searching for somewhere more suitable, Lorraine identified what seems to be an ideal venue – The Kathleen Syme Centre in Faraday Street, Carlton. We have visited the Centre and one of their rooms in particular would meet our AGM needs around Easter next year. Hopefully, it will be a vast improvement on the previous venue and having to use sign language and charades, even though it was held at the Melbourne Performing Arts Centre and no Logies for our efforts were ever forthcoming!!!

2. **The Australian Taxation Office (ATO) Submission.** Many will recall that in 20015/16 AAFICS, together with our World Bank colleagues, submitted a case basically arguing that our UN ‘pensions’ should not be taxed since they were not pensions but ‘emoluments’ earned by our retired members during the conduct of their UN employment (Andrew Macoun vs ATO). Whilst the Full Court of the Federal Court agreed with this, the ATO appealed to the higher court in Australia, the High Court, who unanimously dismissed this decision in favour of the status quo. However, one of our new AAFICS members in Victoria tried to approach this taxation problem in a unique way, targeting the current level of the Undeducted Purchase Price (UPP), in most cases around 10%, and requesting this be raised to 50% to align with the Capital Gains Tax relief given to real estate investors. His research established that the Tax Commissioner can use his discretion under the Income Tax Assessment Act (1936) to determine the deductible (UPP) amount of a UN Pension. So, instead of going through the law courts along the ‘emolument’ vs ‘pension’ argument again, he submitted a request for a private ruling. In this he argued that the UN is not a country, or a commercial company, it is an intergovernmental organization, in which the Australian Government is an active member and financial contributor. However, depending on the number of Australian UN employees who all must pay staff assessments of from 28 to 34 per cent of their actual gross salary, this annual accumulated amount is then deducted from Australia’s dues to the UN. As such, the Government is contributing and benefitting from UN retiree pensions, so it makes no sense that these pensions are then taxed at full marginal rates. If successful, this ruling would have benefitted all of us paying tax on our UN pension. However, it was rejected saying that ‘the Commissioner could not form an opinion or support an alternative calculation (of the UPP) on the basis of the contentions raised’. We have also made written submissions to the Treasurer and DFAT with no outcome either. Nevertheless, our member is still challenging the ruling and awaiting further response from the ATO. We applaud him for his tenacity.

3. **AAFICS Handbook Update.** Following on from our Victoria AGM, work has commenced updating the AAFICS Handbook aimed at helping our next of kin when we pass on. The Handbook helps us record our personal information, what it is, where it is located and ensuring the UNJSPF pension continues to the relevant recipient. We were fortunate to receive a copy of a similar document prepared by the New Zealand Association of Former United Nations Officials (AFUNO-NZ) that was originally based on our Handbook but then updated. One of our members in Victoria agreed to undertake our Handbook update and, being very impressed with the AFUNO-NZ version in its presentation, will use it to modify ours. We have given the Handbook a provisional title to better reflect its purpose - “BEFORE YOUR DEMISE. RECORDING YOUR PERSONAL DETAILS/INSTRUCTIONS.” (An AAFICS Handbook to Help You and Your Next of Kin). Our new Handbook will be available for members’ use in the New Year.
4. **Developing an AAFICS Checklist Booklet.** Our Victorian AGM highlighted another important issue. One of our new members who has recently retired focused attention on the fact that those UN employees who are about to cease their service with the UN and are contemplating returning or retiring to Australia have virtually no information on what to expect here and what to do before arriving in Australia. Even our Australian Embassies overseas often have no, or very little, published information to help Australians with this. It was therefore suggested that a Checklist was needed and that AAFICS would be the most appropriate body to prepare and disseminate that. Therefore, a small, local sub-committee in Victoria (six members in total) was formed to undertake the task. The first stage was to establish the Checklist Headings (Section 1) and then, later, to develop the explanatory text under those (Section 2). Accordingly, a first draft containing 17 headings was compiled, refined and then sent to our AAFICS President for comment and further circulation for input of all the State Coordinators. That process is currently continuing and awaiting responses.

The provisional title of the draft Booklet is - **Are you in UN Service and Contemplating Returning/Retiring to Australia? Check Out this Checklist! (2020).** When all the responses have been received, the Checklist Headings will be finalized and the sub-committee will commence developing Section 2, the Explanatory Text. It is proposed that the Checklist Booklet will be available in the New Year for distribution in Australia and overseas. Members will be encouraged to provide feedback to ensure that all issues have been covered and identify any that are missing. By the end of 2020, it is hoped that the first revision of the Booklet will be undertaken based on this feedback.

On behalf of all of the AAFICS Victoria members, we send you, far and wide, our Christmas and New Year Greetings. Travel safely and enjoy your festivities with family and friends.

**Mike Patto, Victoria State Coordinator**

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**QUEENSLAND**

View of the Glasshouse Mountains from the verandah of the King Ludwig German Restaurant, Maleny where the Queensland AAFICS lunch was held. (All photos courtesy Martin Hadlow.)
Queenslanders strive to give their visitors a warm welcome. As National President Jennifer Ashton travelled to the Sunshine Coast in early November to join AAFICS Queensland members at their twice-yearly lunch, we dialled up the mercury to reach 36 degrees on the day following the lunch when Jennifer was hoping to chill out with us. Not to be outdone, Sydney laid on some wild weather which led to Jennifer’s return flight being cancelled. Just to make sure she was warm enough, some gusty northerly winds rekindled a bushfire which had broken out earlier in the week, about 10 km upwind of our home. The Emergency Services were sufficiently disturbed by these events to issue an evacuation notice to the 10,000 residents of neighbouring Tewantin just after dark. We went to bed on the Friday night in a state of readiness to evacuate ourselves, but as it happened the wind shifted to the south, so we were able to stay put. Jennifer eventually got back to Canberra, and a very worried Hugo, 24 hours later than she had planned. We wonder if she is game to return next year?

*President Jennifer Ashton addresses the lunch. Queensland State Coordinator, Mike Sackett (right).*

Actually, the lunch itself was highly successful. Some 21 of us (from 11 different UN agencies) attended, including six new participants, whom we particularly welcomed. The wise words of Jennifer, German beer, and German food (not necessarily in that order!) were enjoyed by the group while surveying the distant Glasshouse Mountains on a toasty Spring day.

*Attentive listeners as Jennifer delivers her words of wisdom.*
Meals are on the way, so AAFICS diners socialize while they await the best of the wurst.

With season’s greetings and best wishes for the holidays.

Mike Sackett, Queensland State Coordinator

VALE UN STAFF

Graham Davey
We are sad to learn of the passing of AAFICS Queensland member, Graham Davey. Graham was a regular at AAFICS lunches and we send condolences to Jeanette and family. (News from Mike Sackett.)

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Sadako Ogata
The first woman to head a UN agency (UNHCR), Sadako Ogata passed away on the 22nd October at the age of 92 years. She was universally highly regarded and took over an agency which had major problems, both financial and in dealing with countless calls on its services in handling refugees and displaced people from Yugoslavia to Rwanda, Afghanistan to the Kurdish areas of Iraq. During the ten years she was in charge of the UNHCR, both the organization’s staff numbers and budget doubled to handle the global crises then in play. After her UN service, Ms Ogata became President of the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA).
I have written my life story this year. I have printed two copies in hardback books. Neither of my sons is interested (yet) but I am hopeful that my two granddaughters will one day open the pages and learn about their family. I have asked myself “What am I doing writing my life story?” Surely, I have better things to do? Perhaps it is pure self-indulgence. I have certainly enjoyed reminiscing to myself and ruminating over past events. Perhaps they will take on a new meaning after all these years. I can see more clearly my follies, and I can luxuriate in my successes again. Or I can try to cast this exercise as a high-minded activity whereby I pass on to future generations the wisdom of my experiences. Who am I kidding? No-one learns by others’ mistakes.

I have a family, albeit a small one. I would like them to know a little about their antecedents. There was sparse information passed to me from the past, and that saddens me. I would like to know much more than I have been able to discover. And I would not like my heirs to say that I left them nothing. I knew my Grandpa Clements who was born in 1878 before cars were on the road. I know my granddaughter who was born in 2015 and who will hopefully live until around 2100. In a real sense, my story could be considered to span over 220 years. I am wedged in the middle of that epoch; it is a unique time period, never to be repeated. It is history. Is that enough reason to write?

With the emergence of such commercial companies as Ancestry.com, we have access to huge amounts of census data both here and in the UK. In addition, there are now computerised versions of parish records that go back much further than census data. Amazingly, one day I spat into a tube and now have my DNA profile. My antecedents came from the centre of England and were sprinkled with bits of Norse and Irish. I have requested birth and death certificates and some marriage certificates in an effort to find a bit of juicy scandal! The result has been an absorbing and rewarding pastime.

I encourage anyone to have a go. There are commercial templates you can follow if you do not have the confidence to plunge in. But be warned, researching your ancestors is both fascinating and addictive.

John Clements
AAFICS Victoria, former WHO medical officer
CROSSING AFRICA ON TWO WHEELS: CAPE TOWN TO CAIRO

Readers will recall that we published a photo and short article in our July Newsletter from Peter Steele (AAFCS Victoria). The photo showed Peter and his motorbike at the Meroe Pyramids in Sudan. This sounded a very exciting trip...so we asked for more details and Peter has kindly obliged. This is his amazing story.

Ninety days on the road and the 12,000 km journey from Cape Town to Cairo was completed during the first week of June. Two bikes and four riders – with Kristian riding the entire journey and three others sharing Anna’s bike – followed the road north from South Africa into Namibia before shifting direction to ride up the eastern side of the continent. The road tracked into Zambia and Malawi and then turned north again - into Tanzania, Kenya and Ethiopia, before exchanging the greenness of the East African highlands for the deserts of Sudan and Egypt. We rode 10-year old Suzuki DKZ 400 cc enduro bikes.

Africa. Because it’s there

Africa: 20% of the land area of the planet and covering 30M km2 (so, six times larger than Australia) and home to an estimated 1.2b people and counting. Politically, the place comprises 54 modern states (plus nine territories & two de facto independent states that no one recognizes). Less than 200 years ago it was still the ‘dark continent’ in the images of the early European explorers, missionaries and merchant adventurers; then those same European countries were quick to carve the place into half a dozen empires – British, French & Portuguese with the Spanish, Germans and Italians trailing. This thing about ‘ignore the local inhabitants - just occupy the place’. Seven million years ago Africa (East Africa in particular) provided the human and Hominidae forebears of the species that eventually colonized the world. Imagine.

Starting point. Everyone starts or finishes at Cape Point - few kilometres south of Cape Town. The helicopter images of the Boorman/McGregor ride along this stretch are classic motor-biking images. This was us starting out. (All photos courtesy Peter Steele.)
On reflection - taking that first step
Travel brings its own special opportunities and, whilst it’s a challenge to take a journey on two wheels from Cape Town to Cairo, that challenge is not so much the physical hardship, even the planning, preparation, etc. required when getting ready, moving out, etc. – the real challenge is all inside. Do you have the confidence to make the ride, what if you flake out part-way through, what if … may happen, and so on? Reflect upon the barriers of you (meaning *you* - yes **YOU**) making the ride as probably becoming more difficult the older you get, the further you are from the place where you started (in life … and not simply this particular journey) and, equally, your lack of experience/knowledge/contacts/etc. in the places where you may eventually find yourself. Remember, however, that others have gone before – you’ll never ever be the first person to do anything (well, probably) given that others will have beaten you to it. And, remember, that where you will be going there are people just like you and me … hopefully … but it is largely true - lots of ordinary people who have never had your kind of experience. These are people too busy making a living, raising families and/or too poor to do what you are doing. They may, however, find you interesting because of your colour, your gender, your appearance and, simply, because you are a newcomer/different – riding a motorbike and covered in dust/mud. Enjoy the novelty.

Simply catch the long-distance bus
And this thing about many others doing the same thing – three months in Africa following those many hundreds of others who make this most challenging of long-distance journeys each year. Most travellers take public transport, humping their backpacks from bus to campsite or from train to taxi-bus to hostel. You can, quite literally, and relatively easily, catch a public bus the whole way. It’s cheap too. Read ‘Dark Star Safari’ – it’s a good read – published in 2002; author Paul Theroux - describing the author’s journey from Cairo to Cape Town by bus, train and boat.

Many people prefer to travel under their own steam
Then there are the self-contained travellers in their 4x4s, trucks and cars. Choose your route with care, and you can now travel the whole way on tar sealed roads – Chinese road building teams completed the remaining 500 km Isola-Moyale murrum stretch in Kenya in 2016; the remaining gravel north of Moyale in Ethiopia is due for completion this year. Nairobi-Addis Ababa thus
becomes a 24h truck haul. Never has Africa been so small. So, you can, quite literally, make the journey all the way up/down Africa in any itsy-bitsy little town car - Morris Minor, Daewoo Nubira, Renault Clio? Naaaw, that’s too easy and, anyhow, it’s already been done – many times.

At Victoria Falls, Zambia.

In places, Africa may appear to be under-developed, poorly managed, abused and rather distant but, surprisingly, it is quickly surrendering to those middle-income people that are pulling themselves up by their boot-laces everywhere there is a dollar (kwacha, rand, shilling or pound) to be made. Get there soon if you want to see those original Africa images, some of which are still available on the National Geographic Channel.

Milestones.

Push biking is hard work
Oh, and before leaving those long-distant travellers behind – brief mention to those who bike the continent from end-to-end - on push-bikes no less. Imagine the northern deserts – the amount of water that you have to carry; the hours spent riding in the sun (or, if at night, the dangers that you face from the ‘refuse to use my headlights’ brigade). Journeys of this kind, however, are only dangerous if you ignore the usual safety rules - you are unlikely to get robbed, shot or worse if you stay with the majority travellers on the main routes – through the benign countries.
The reality is one where dehydration, diarrhoea, food poisoning, malaria and similar is more likely or you’ll get shaken down by the local boys in blue/plod for a cadeau, with a worst-case scenario of being run down by a truck or bus because you were too slow to get out of the way. But then you buy insurance for those unforeseen options and for best you travel with a mate, wife/husband or sibling.

**Best of all you ride a motorbike**

We chose to ride motorbikes – surprisingly, few others do. You may know of/have seen the commercial ride by Charley Boorman and Ewan McGregor from Scotland to Cape Town in 2007. Great ride and great television images; and it stimulated a whole host of copycat riders – including us. You can buy the DVD and read the books, but that’s not the same as actually doing it. Don’t know this one? Check it out at: [http://topdocumentaryfilms.com/long-way-down/](http://topdocumentaryfilms.com/long-way-down/). Sit back with the CD and enjoy the armchair ride.

You are more exposed on a motorbike; you get all the atmosphere, you catch the weather, you get wet and muddy and, in reality, you look much like the locals at the end of the day enveloped in a covering of red dust – equally poor, dirty or unkempt. *And ... it ... can ... be ... really ... hot.* Local
people whom you meet on the road relate more to people when they can approach you direct and face-to-face.

_Catching the ferry across Lake Nasser from Sudan to Egypt._

**Want to read more?**

There were no downsides to the ride, except looking back and wishing that you had made the effort to ride the whole way, but then we were sharing bikes and not everyone had three months to spare. We maintained a blog of the journey, however, and if you have a spare evening – weekend even - and this sort of thing interests you, check in at [http://www.Crossafrica.wordpress.com](http://www.Crossafrica.wordpress.com) for the full story. Bear with us, however, for the blog was not finished and, possibly, it never will be. (Remember, it works backwards ... you need to ... scroll through to the beginning.)

_End point. Where else? The Pyramids of Giza on the outskirts of Cairo; the most famous human-made structures in the world. This thing about ‘Man fears time; time fears the Pyramids’. The line comes from the Sound&Light spectacular on the Giza Plateau._
NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

Sincere thanks to all who have submitted articles, photographs and stories for this end-of-year edition of the AAFICS Newsletter. A wonderfully diverse and interesting mix of material including some fabulous travel stories and news of worthwhile retirement activities. This is another ‘bumper’ edition as I am reluctant to not include all the wonderful articles we receive. Think about contributing in the future. All articles welcome! The next Newsletter is due around July 2020. Let’s hear from you! Thank you.
PM MORRISON TILTS AT WINDMILLS

During Scott Morrison’s recent trip to the US, did the PM absorb some of Donald Trump’s intellectual genius by a mysterious process of osmosis? How else are we to explain his incoherent, befuddled speech at the Lowy Institute on Thursday evening [3rd October] where he puffed up his own importance by running down the United Nations?

Like Trump’s tweetonic diarrhoea, Morrison’s words will rally the base among the writers and readers of The Australian. But they are unlikely to generate much angst in the UN community, in part because it’s a confused ramble and in part because Australia is not a big name there.

‘We should avoid any reflex towards a negative globalism that coercively seeks to impose a mandate from an often ill-defined borderless global community. And worse still, an unaccountable internationalist bureaucracy’.

What on earth is he on about?

Still, I’m glad the PM has tasked DFAT with a comprehensive audit of global institutions and rule-making processes. The UN system works in myriad ways to shape our daily lives, mainly but not always for the good. The world is interdependent in such diverse areas as financial markets, infectious diseases, climate change, terrorism, nuclear peace, food supply, fish stocks, water tables and ecosystem resources. All of these require joint action for optimum outcomes. The United Nations lies at the centre of this interdependent and networked multilateral global order.

‘The key to progress’ Morrison tells us, is ‘individual, like-minded sovereign nations acting together with enlightened self-interest’. Like the illegal 2003 Iraq war? Listening to the more circumspect UN would have brought a lot less grief to Iraqis, avoided destabilising the entire region, not empowered Iran, and prevented a loss of US reputation and resolve, to Australia’s detriment.

Morrison declared that ‘under my leadership Australia’s international engagement will be squarely driven by Australia’s national interests’. PM, every country’s international engagement is driven by national interests. The UN is the forum for collaborating on common interests-driven national interests and muting clashing interests-driven conflict.

Is he saying Australia will reject a Security Council resolution adopted under chapter 7 of the UN Charter ordering us to do, or not to do, something? If so, that would be a violation of international law: it is not a voluntary but a mandatory directive that binds even a Security Council member that voted against the resolution.

Or, is he saying that Australia will not implement resolutions adopted under permissive clauses outside chapter 7, or resolutions of the General Assembly, or international agreements and declarations to which we have not signed up? If so, he should schedule a session with DFAT where he can be assured that Australia can indeed accept or reject them. Of course, we may have to pay reputational (as with our torture-like treatment of boat people), self-harm (as with our environmental policies) and material costs (for example if we were to spurn health norms issued by the World Health Organisation).

Morrison’s framing of binary choices is fallacious. He rejected the binary choice between China and the US. He should have shown similar sagacity on bilateralism and multilateralism, national interests
and globalism. The East Timor crisis would have been more challenging for us in 1999 without the bilateral-multilateral synergy of the Australian-led, UN-mandated peacekeeping force and political mission. The UN is fundamentally an inter-governmental organisation where policy is set by member states. Part of the accoutrements of national sovereignty is the freedom to be as stupid as we want. But in passing let’s note that in 1996, it was the Howard government that took the lead in getting the General Assembly to adopt the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) in an effort to coerce India into giving up the nuclear option. Now that others have adopted exactly the same tactical manoeuvre to adopt the nuclear Ban Treaty, we cry foul over UN over-reach.

Or is he saying that Australia has the will and wherewithal to adopt an a la carte approach to UN-centred multilateralism? We know he subscribes to miracles. But it may be a miracle too far to believe that Australia can construct a world in which all others have to obey universal norms and rules, but we can opt out whenever, as often, and for as long as we like on global norms with respect to refugee treatment, indigenous policies, nuclear weapons and climate change.

Conversely, a world in which every country retreated into unilateralism would not be a better guarantee of Australia’s national security and economic wellbeing than rules-based multilateral regimes. To Morrison, ‘rules based global order’ might be just a marketing slogan. Yet the principle is vital for Australia’s national interests that encompass far-flung commercial, strategic and environmental interests and links. The UN system is the biggest incubator of rules to govern the world, from trade, refugees and the law of the sea, to the use of force and the regulation of armaments. This means that even while rejecting any individual UN norm because of divergent national interests, we must still work hard to protect the principle of UN-centric multilateralism: destroying that will cause fatal damage to our core national interests.

Speaking in the presence of John Howard, Morrison declared: ‘we will decide our interests and the circumstances in which we seek to pursue them’. If only we had a PM who has the sagacity and fortitude to say: ‘we will decide who our enemies are and the circumstances in which we go to war’.

‘Pragmatic’ international engagement based on the cooperation of sovereign nation states, according to the PM, is ‘being challenged by a new variant of globalism that seeks to elevate global institutions above the authority of nation states to direct national policies’. Really? A quick refresher in post-1945 international history: for six decades the US-led West, with Australia a raucous cheerleader, elevated global institutions above the authority of nation states to direct national policies on human rights, women’s rights and, more recently, gender equality. If Morrison wishes to reverse these advances, let him say so. Conversely, to facilitate an intelligent conversation, perhaps he could provide concrete examples of just what in hell he is talking about.

International organisations including the UN are the agents, and nation states are their principals. Policies are decided by member states, never UN officials. The single most influential member is the US. This doesn’t mean the US gets all it wants all the time. But before right-wing nutters get into a frenzy about my claim, let them posit their candidate for the most influential UN member state.

The west continues to exercise influence totally disproportionate to the 13% share of world population. Three of the five permanent members of the Security Council – 60% – are Western. By 2021 when Antonio Guterres completes his first term, a West European will have been Secretary General for 29 of the UN’s 76 years, compared to 20 years for Asians who make up 59% of the world’s population. Most of the heavyweight senior ranks are held by Westerners, including heads of political, peacekeeping, humanitarian and disarmament affairs. Ditto most of the important UN agencies.
The real problem is that with the US in decline and China rising, the West faces becoming norm takers and doesn’t like the prospect. How exactly does Morrison think he can reposition Australia to become a standard setter? Especially when he is threatening to disengage Australia from some of the main currents of multilateralism so that others will turn around and ask: ‘Australia, where the bloody hell are you’?

The United Nations remains our best and only hope for unity-in-diversity in a world in which global problems require multilateral answers: solutions without passports for problems without passports. Peter Dutton’s solution of enlarging the pool of passport-less Australian citizens is not the answer.

Ramesh Thakur, Emeritus Professor in the Crawford School of Public Policy, Australian National University, is a former United Nations Assistant Secretary-General.

(Our sincere thanks to AAFICS member, Ramesh Thakur, for allowing us to reprint this article first published in October at https://johnmenadue.com/ramesh-thakur-pm-morrison-tilts-at-UN-windmill/)
MAYBE THE UN HAS MOVED?

Your Editor dutifully sent his Certificate of Entitlement (CoE) document to the UNJSPF this year with a nice $3 postage stamp and had it returned a few weeks later. (See below.) It seems that the US Postal Service is now unable to find the United Nations! The returned CoE was then popped into a larger, plain envelope, sent again to the same address and all was well.

Coincidentally, on the subject of whether the UN should, or could, ever be moved from its HQ in New York, Ramesh Thakur has another fascinating view on-line at https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/relocating-the-united-nations/

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THE ILO CENTENARY

In an era in which we are bombarded with political messages claiming that the ‘Australian spirit’ was born on the beaches of Gallipoli and the fields of the Western Front, and during a time when hundreds of millions of dollars have been poured into museums and projects to mark the centenary of World War I, little, if any, attention has been given to the political, social and cultural achievements – many of them world firsts – that defined Australia well before the ANZACS of the First World War. Australia might have introduced a White Australia policy and been remiss in its treatment of its indigenous people, but among the many reforms that attracted early international attention were the eight-hour day, the introduction of a Court of Conciliation and Arbitration to resolve industrial disputes, minimum wages, an aged and invalid pension, and universal enfranchisement including votes for women.
This year is also the centenary of the founding of the International Labour Organization (ILO), the second of all the UN bodies to be created (the first, was the International Postal Union) in the aftermath of World War I and in the hope of creating a peaceful world order where there would be no more war. It is easy now to forget how radical the idea behind the ILO’s mandate was, as summed up in the Preamble to its Constitution: “Universal and lasting peace can be established only if it is based upon social justice”. Just as revolutionary was its structure, bringing together governments, workers and employers to determine labour standards. Australia was a founding member of the ILO.

Former AAFICS President, Mary Johnson, has been active in lobbying the Australian government to commemorate the ILO centenary as Australia, with its innovations in workplace relations, was key in providing early support to the fledgling organisation. Unfortunately, since Mary was lobbying prior to the election held in May, neither of the major parties could commit to action, although the response from Labour was fulsome, while from the Coalition it was non-existent. I took up the baton from June, and wrote to the Minister of Employment, Senator Michaelia Cash, only to receive the response that the Minister’s office was very busy and that they would reply as soon as possible. And again, when I reminded her. Discovering that relations with the ILO were now within the Attorney-General’s Office, I finally contacted both the AG, Christian Porter, and the Department itself. At last, on 2nd December, I received a reply.

Rest assured Australia has been extremely active in the celebration. If I may summarise:

- Minister for Employment, Senator Michaelia Cash, led the delegation to the commemorative International Labour Conference;
- Australia was one of 16 countries involved in the drafting of the Centenary Declaration of the Future of Work;
- The Government convened a national dialogue on the future of work (I have no further information on this despite very active Googling);
- The Secretary of the (then) Department of Jobs and Small Business, now deposed in the most recent public service shake-up, led a delegation with the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry and the ACTU to have fruitful discussions with the ILO on the above;
- Australia continues to be a deputy member of the ILO’s governing board and played an active role in finalising the programme and budget for 2020-2021;
- Australia is the 12th largest donor to ILO. Australia contributed $3 million over 3 years for a Better Work programme.

Jennifer Ashton, AAFICS President
THE UN SYSTEM AND THE U3A

Around a year or so ago, I wrote an article on my experience, in retirement, with two U3A branches in Warrnambool and Port Fairy. I have given talks to them on meteorology, oceanography, climate and tsunamis, technical subjects of which I have a modicum of knowledge. Another of these talks was on WMO, the agency for which I worked for 20 years. The audience knew little of WMO and its work, though the local Bureau of Meteorology is always in their thoughts these days. Nevertheless, they all seemed keen to learn more of international agencies, which prompted the thought that I might put together something on the UN System more broadly.

With encouragement and a little initial help from Jennifer, I resolved to move ahead with this project. Clearly the UN System is too enormous and unwieldy to try to cover everything, so I decided to focus on what I saw as key elements in helping people understand what the system is, how it works, what has been achieved, and why it is still essential to the world. What was originally intended as a single PPT presentation, eventually became two fairly lengthy ones:

1. The UN itself, its antecedent League of Nations, and some of its component activities and programmes;
2. A selection of the specialised agencies.

My selection of items was based partly on my personal experience of some of them, thus allowing me to insert personal anecdotes (e.g. WMO, UNESCO, IMO, ITU, UNEP, IPCC, UNFCCC), and my belief in the broadscale importance of what was being done (e.g. UNHCR, UNDP, WHO, ILO). Almost all items had embedded video clips downloaded from YouTube, and the material and still photos for them I gleaned mostly from their websites.

Eric Van Der Wal, a former DFAT official with extensive knowledge of the UN system speaks on UN processes to the Warrnambool U3A. (Photo courtesy Peter Dexter.)
As I noted earlier, U3A members are mostly retired professionals, still eager to learn more of the world, so highly intelligent and well-read. Nevertheless, even amongst such an audience, there was an almost total lack of experience and knowledge of the UN System. Most of what they knew came from the generally negative reporting in the Australian media and reflected the developing nationalist and anti-international sentiment in our society. As several audience members pointed out, even when you see in the media the international reaction to refugee crises, disasters, etc., and you might see an occasional blue helmet and UN flag, very little verbal mention is ever made of the presence and work of the UN agencies and programmes.

The reaction to my talks was overwhelmingly positive, with strong support for me to spread the talks more widely beyond the U3A, to local community groups and even to schools. This is something I’ll certainly consider for coming years. In fact, I’ve already been thinking about getting my two climate related talks into schools, as it’s likely that climate issues will feature more heavily in the future in school curricula. Three responses to illustrate reactions:

1. One of the video clips I showed was from FAO, about their aid to a rice farmer in Indonesia, to improve his techniques and rice yield, and at the same time develop a fish farm in the paddy fields he was working. This improved not just his own personal situation, but it helped him to develop a small business and employ others, thus aiding his whole local community. People were literally gobsmacked by the effectiveness of this one-on-one assistance from a major international agency.

2. There was one audience member who had some ongoing experience of doing volunteer work for WHO in Vietnam and other SE Asia countries. She told me she has been struck by the amount of aid money that disappears into the pockets of corrupt local politicians and officials and asked what can be done about this. Of course, this is something of which we’re all well aware, and there’s no easy (or any) answer, to my knowledge.

3. At the end, some members asked if it might be possible to get a major media outlet, like the ABC or SBS, to produce a full programme on the UN System and its work, to be widely distributed on TV and elsewhere. I’m not sure of the feasibility of this, but maybe other AAFICS members might have further thoughts.

As I said, overall the response to these talks was extremely positive, which encourages me to continue with this locally. I’m still not entirely satisfied with the content and structure of the talks, which need more work. However, when I am happy with them, I’d be more than willing to make them available to others. With all the video clips, the files are rather large, so perhaps AAFICS has access to some form of drop box where I could leave them? In any case, I really do believe that we can and should be doing more to spread the word on all the great things being done by the programmes and organizations we love/hate and remain passionate about.

As a footnote to this, my U3A talks were followed almost immediately by one on the World Bank, by a local person who had worked for it in Washington DC for many years, and there will be another, on ‘UN Processes’, later in November. Obviously, there are others in our little community, once involved in UN related activities, of whom I have not yet been made aware.

AAFICS Victoria member Peter Dexter, formerly WMO
UN LIFE: A FAMILY PERSPECTIVE

Living in Lahore and Islamabad, Pakistan in the 1990s

When my husband asked in 1992 would I be prepared to accompany him on his one year posting as Chief Technical Adviser to the International Waterlogging and Salinity Research Institute in Lahore, Pakistan with our two young sons aged 3 and 6, I thought it would be a great idea. Most of my friends thought I’d lost the plot, but having travelled a bit prior to marriage and again before we had our family, I thought it would be a good time to introduce our sons to travel and another culture for their education.

We made plans to leave, which meant renting out our home in Glen Waverley, Victoria. As my father-in-law lived in the UK, we thought it would be prudent for me to stay in the UK until Mike could find accommodation for us all in Lahore.

On November 16 we left the UK almost a month after Mike had gone to Pakistan. Arriving in Lahore and being thrust into a frenetic city where personal space of any description was at a premium, it took a bit of adjustment. Pollution levels were certainly testing. After a short time in an apartment for students of the International Institute for Land Reclamation and Improvement (ILRI), Wageningen, The Netherlands in a military cantonment area, we moved to a newly built townhouse near the university, alongside the Lahore branch canal.

Our eldest son, Chris, was then enrolled in the International School of Choueifat and our youngest son, James, was eventually settled into an English Medium kindergarten. On reflection Chris managed without complaint to settle into his school, but hindsight tells me this was fairly traumatic for him with only a few other foreign boys speaking English there. Although English medium was used in the class room, the playground was a totally different situation where most local children naturally reverted to Urdu. James at 3 was a lot more dependent, and the only way I could get him to stay at kinder, was for me to have a child’s chair at the back of the room, from where over a two-week period I managed to eventually make it outside onto the verandah. The kinder had some
rabbits and guinea pigs in cages, so we always went via the green-grocer to take them food - another little trick.

We all settled in over the coming months using the UN club as our social outlet. They put on Christmas festivities and other events, which we all enjoyed. I managed to persuade the cook at the club to do some cooking for me for the boys, so brownies and other such treats kept these active boys going. You do adjust to being the centre of attention on the streets, particularly as our youngest son was a honey blonde at this stage of his life. Many pinched cheeks! Being asked to have photographs taken with locals was constant, and until this day, I still wonder why you would want photographs of us as complete strangers. Many teenagers wanted to test out their English, which was understandable, but it did become intrusive in the end, so we had to restrict this sometimes.

![Lahore museum.](image1.jpg) ![Lahore Walled City and mosque.](image2.jpg)

The boys were able to have horse riding lessons, piano lessons (much less enjoyed, more endured). We had bought a small canvas wading pool as the summer came upon us which was on our top balcony with chix screening. It kept the boys cool and outside. As the heat increased and the power outages became a regular thing, each evening we would empty the pool which was so hot it would burn, refill and as soon as power went off, all four of us traipsed upstairs and into the pool while we had no air-conditioning.

![Boys in pool.](image3.jpg)

The house was not built to sustain a comfortable climate, so as the summer came upon us we moved the boys to our basement and we dropped a level and eventually we could only cool one room on ground floor level, so we all slept in the same room, with the computer and tv as well! As Mike’s contract was for one year, then extended to one and a half years, we returned to Australia and the boys went to local schools. However, Mike was then asked to develop the project further over another 3 years, so we all returned to Pakistan again.

In July 1994, with our house emptied again and rented, we flew out to meet Mike for a holiday before he returned to Pakistan for his project extension. Mike had thought it would be easier though for us to live in Islamabad and had found an amazing 4 br, 4 bath single storey house not far from the beautiful main mosque. The latter was built with funding from Saudi Arabia – so the call to prayer became our alarm clock! He had also bought me that most precious of items, a car, as I was happy to drive in this architect-designed capital city, which had a diplomatic enclave, thus limited occupants and traffic. He already had our staff organised, so our ability to slip into a new life was seamless. He had also enrolled the boys into the highly successful American
International School of Islamabad (ISI), that provided door to door transport for our youngest and a coach at the end of our street for our eldest. Too easy.

Life resumed, centred around the US satellite centre, (drop in coffee & events), the UN club and access to the American Embassy for all the sporting events and activities that were arranged by the school. There were 67 nationalities at this school that had a policy of 1/3 Americans, 1/3 Pakistanis and 1/3 other foreign nationals. Here it was that the boys’ love of soccer was fostered and still continues, as they are now 30 and 33. They spent an amazing 3 years at ISI where the performing arts and culture were all strong areas. A 50-metre pool covered other needs, together with indoor basketball stadiums and plenty of canteen chapattis and dahl!

With the spouse of a WFP head, I became involved with UNICEF and for 2 years stored and sold all their books, cards and materials and went to all the markets held in the area to help raise funds. I also finished up on the board of the UN club, so was kept more than busy. On Friday nights, Mike would return home from Lahore and we always went to the UN club for dinner. It was here our eldest son discovered the joy of signing a chit ... his generosity was noted jointly by the club and his father when the bill arrived!

We spent most of our summers in the UK, staying with Mike’s family, so life was very pleasant and comfortable. We also took our children to India, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Bali on return, so they became competent international travellers.

Whilst in Islamabad in 1995, I took up a secretarial position with the Head of Immigration in the British High Commission (their largest office outside the UK). I loved this job and made a lifelong friend of my boss. It was in my office on 19 November 1995 that we felt the full force of the two bombs used to attack the Egyptian Embassy in Islamabad. The Embassy was situated some 500 meters from the British and Indian High Commissions and damage was extensive to the Barclays Bank and residences of the British High Commission. Many other buildings in the area were showered with glass and garage doors were folded in half. All our staff were evacuated to the garden of the High Commissioner for the rest of the day, and I was advised that the American school was in lock-down, so all students would need to be collected by parents. The children there had been taught to ‘drop and roll’ in the event of any attacks, so thought it all an adventure. I did not feel frightened by this event, but it did have a huge effect on the British staff and for months afterwards the welfare of their families was a high priority.
As our time in Pakistan was coming to an end, I was delighted to help my boss retire from the public service and return to England. The boys had made many friends over the 3 years in Islamabad, some of whom have popped up on the Worldwide Web. The standard of their education at ISI had been exceptional, keeping them in great stead for a return to the Australian system, where they moved up a grade, despite their age. Mike was subsequently asked to stay for another 5-year extension to the project, but I needed to return home at a critical time for our boys’ education under the Australian system. Five years was a difficult time for Mike to be separated from us, but he always returned each year for the boys’ birthdays (both 10 days apart in May) and for Christmas.

In summary, it was a great experience for our family and I thank the United Nations for allowing us to do that. Learning about and understanding another culture, with our trips around Pakistan meeting the very welcoming villagers who had very little but were still prepared to share it with us, and into India to Delhi, the Taj Mahal and Amritsar via the border with the theatrical gate-closing ceremony, are just some of the amazing memories we brought back home, along with some lifelong friendships.

Lorraine Patto, Victoria

[Sincere thanks, Lorraine, for this absorbing tale of life in such an exotic location. It is also a graphic reminder of the way in which families make major lifestyle and social adjustments when accompanying spouses/partners/parents to postings where difficult circumstances can prevail. Wonderful that Lorraine, Mike and family took it all in their stride, became part of the local scene and enjoyed their years in Pakistan. The three family photographs in the article show the boys staying cool in Lahore, James in Lahore on his 4th birthday, and Lorraine selling UNICEF material in Islamabad. All three photographs were kindly supplied by Lorraine. Ed.]
UN LIFE AND BEYOND

To end the year and to complete this edition of the AAFICS Newsletter, a contemplative reflection from Queensland State Coordinator, Mike Sackett. His personal perspective on life after a UN career will probably ring bells with many AAFICS colleagues. Thank you, Mike, for sharing.

For many of us, working for the UN was the high plateau of our lives. Amidst the recurring dross, droll and drudgery were countless golden opportunities to take on fascinating tasks, encounter amazing people and enjoy unique experiences in exotic places. And perhaps we also did a little good along the way.

Then the day arrives when it all comes to an end and retirement begins – in my case in 2006 after 27 years with FAO and WFP, interspersed with a UNDP stint. I recall in one of my farewell speeches burbling on about a retirement ambition to “live on a big island and visit as many small islands as possible”. I seem to have been more successful with the former than the latter, although we did make it to St. Helena, Ascension Island and the Isle of Skye in the first few months.

Back in Australia it was time to take stock. A conscious attempt was made not to angle for short term UN assignments. The next saddest thing to keeling over and dying the month after one retires, was surely going back to work for the UN equally soon. Rather, Australia was the next “duty station” with terms of reference related to getting a long-term foothold in a new country and breaking into new circles of friendships. A house renovation, along with knee and hip replacements took up much of the first couple of years of retirement, but there were also more fun things like getting back on a bike again. For reasons I can’t explain, it took me over two years to join AAFICS!

Still being only 60, there was a yearning to do some rewarding work in Australia. I qualified as a Queensland Justice of the Peace and applied unsuccessfully for management roles in the Australian Red Cross and the Palm Island Development Corporation, and any sort of role in the local rural fire brigade. I was more successful in securing casual lecturing gigs on UN food assistance and...
humanitarian coordination at the University of the Sunshine Coast and James Cook University, who have been kind enough to invite me back for 11 years now for their annual Refugee Health course.

One quickly learns that there are heaps of worthwhile voluntary activities around. Initially, I volunteered to be the speaker organiser for a retiree group, which for the next five years provided an entrée to interesting people in the area. For three years, I was a volunteer driver at the Brisbane International Tennis. Managing to get lost between Brisbane Airport and the City with Caroline Wozniacki’s mum and dad in the back of the car certainly wasn’t my finest moment. And then there was New Year’s Eve 2014, when I was assigned to drive Rafael Nadal’s Uncle Tony to a dinner date with the instruction to pick him up at such and such a time. What irony, considering the number of times I had given the very same instruction in WFP Country Director days!

For something completely different I took on the role of volunteer company monitor with the Australian Shareholders’ Association, which aims to promote the interests of small shareholders, vis-à-vis the fat cats of the financial world. This involves going through with a fine tooth-comb the Annual Reports of Brisbane headquartered companies such as Flight Centre, Suncorp and Technology One. The sections on management remuneration, while spectacularly dense and mind-numbing, are sometimes rich in egregious payment behaviour. I particularly remember at the AGM of another company calling out the bosses who had paid themselves a full bonus for almost reaching their production target and getting a round of applause from fellow shareholders for my pains. More recently, I have become active in a local environmental organization seeking to preserve and extend the national park network in the northern Sunshine Coast area. Somewhat foolishly, I put my hand up to be membership secretary which entailed learning my first ever accounting software package. No sooner had I done that than a change was made to a new package, in which I am currently in the painful process of acquiring competency.

Notwithstanding my earlier disparagement about working again for the UN in retirement, I did get sucked-in of course. I couldn’t resist the offer in 2011 to lead a strategic review of food assistance in Afghanistan, a favourite country where I had worked 10 years earlier. I subsequently did a flood response evaluation in Pakistan and joined a Department of Peace-Keeping Operations Board of Enquiry into the shooting down of a UN helicopter in South Sudan. Other highlights were spells in Vanuatu and Papua New Guinea which I re-visited over 40 years after working there in my pre-UN days. Best of all were acting WFP Country Director assignments in Sri Lanka, South Sudan and Uganda –lots of variety, lots of interaction with bright, young, highly motivated staff (in any objective analysis far smarter than we were at comparable age?) The most recent one was a couple of years ago leading a lessons-learned exercise on WFP’s response to El Nino drought in Southern Africa – which had the added advantage of being able to stay with my elder daughter and her family in Johannesburg.

So where do things stand today? My priorities are now my family (grandchildren have increased from one to four during my retirement), my absorbing local voluntary work (including AAFICS), my acre and a half of garden, dabbling in the increasingly fickle share market and further travel to ‘out of the ordinary’ countries. In all probability I have now, at last, fully and finally retired from the UN.

Mike Sackett, AAFICS Queensland
ABOUT US

The AAFICS Newsletter is an informal communications tool designed to keep former UN staff members residing in Australia in touch with each other and their Association’s activities. Editorial responsibility for articles is held by the individual contributor. The Editor appreciates any stories or articles of interest and thanks all who have contributed to this edition. Photographs are either supplied or taken from public Internet sources for non-commercial, private use. Please send any articles via the office of the President at jenniferlashton@gmail.com or to the Editor or through your local State Coordinator. The next Newsletter will be released in July 2020. Articles should reach the Editorial team by the end of June 2020 at the latest.

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