May column

Claudio Schuftan



THE HONORARY CONSUL

HELLO AND GOODBYE TO THE PRESIDENT

Ho Chi Minh City. It has been a very busy month. My editor tells me that as a columnist I should write about myself, as well as the human right to nutrition, so now is a good time to let you know that I am the Honorary Consul of Chile in this city. The weekend of 24 March we had the visit of Sebastian Piñera, the President of Chile, the country of my birth and young life, for 48 hours. It was a success. But do not ask me to tell you about all the preparations that go into a presidential visit. It was a whole month of intense work, which included two advanced protocol missions from Santiago. There was also an almost obsessive review of the programme minute by minute with the Vietnamese protocol and security – not to mention the many changes requested by the presidential delegation that had to be complied with at short notice. Ah yes, also the visit to three five-star hotels to select the suite where the President and First Lady would stay and the visit and inspection of absolutely all the places the delegation was to visit.

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The day eventually came. Off I was with my wife Aviva to the airport to receive the presidential plane in the tarmac. We went through rather complicated procedures to get personal badges, as well as one for our car. The Chilean Air Force aircraft landed on time in the burning sun of midday. There we were at the end of the red carpet to shake hands. Then it was a zip-record-time motorcade trip to the city (yes, one of those with a *wow wow wow* siren of motorcycles…).

On arrival at the hotel, the President closed a Chilean-Vietnamese businessmen seminar in a lunch where he gave a good speech as we enjoyed a Chilean smoked salmon, abalone and table grapes menu washed down with those delicious Chilean wines. There was hardly time thereafter to move to where the President made 30 minutes of his time available to meet the smallish local Chilean community. You see me in the picture above with my wife, greeting the President.

A trip home to shower and change clothes followed, because at 6 o'clock was the 30 minute political meeting with the leaders of the Ho Chi Minh City People's Committee at the gorgeous Reunification Palace you can see in the photo. I did not attend that meeting, but rather spent the time with the First Lady and the rest of the delegation in waiting. At 18.30 was the official banquet in the same palace, followed by an impressive traditional music and dance show which saw the President joining the musicians and dancers on the floor.



Above is the Ho Chi Minh City (former Saigon) Palace of Reunification, scene of traditional Vietnamese music and dance for the Chilean President





Left, a cross-section of Cu Chi tunnels used by the Viet Cong in their defeat of the US army. Right, the size of the tunnels, built to withstand bombing

The next morning, four boats were waiting for us at the pier on the Saigon River. After an hour and a half of navigation upriver we reached the historical site of the Cu Chi tunnels. This underground maze extending in this location for 200 kilometres was used by the Viet Cong in their resistance to the US invading army during the war of reunification. It included underground hospitals, dormitories, weapons factories and classrooms. The President thoroughly enjoyed the tour and showed a good knowledge of Vietnamese history of those days.

It was 3 o'clock before we got back to an informal buffet lunch at the President's hotel. The rest of the afternoon, all members of the delegation wanted to go shopping – what else. So I took some of them to the central market, and taught them how to bargain Saigon style.

Sunday noon was the scheduled departure time. Aviva and I arrived already at 9 in the morning to have the chance of last minutes chats with delegation members in the lobby of the hotel. Ten minutes before departure to the airport, the President rushed through the lobby with his security escort and only said: 'Not yet gentlemen' and rushed out of the hotel. It turned out that he went to a nearby shop to buy two gorgeous miniature sailing ship replicas popular with the tourists in Ho Chi Minh City. After a 20 minute delay, it was back on the wow, wow, wow caravan to the airport, the red carpet, the handshakes and the goodbyes. Here I am at the airport



Here I am (shown in the first picture in the column) greeting the President, and here I am (above) saying goodbye to him at Ho Chi Minh City airport.

saying goodbye. It had all gone as per plan. Sigh of relief and back home. I have had enough of diplomatic protocol for a while.

RIO 2012

GREETINGS TO MY YOUNG COLLEAGUES

So enough of diplomacy. If you read this short column in the first days when this issue is on-line, I will be in Rio de Janeiro for our *Rio2012* congress, enjoying some chilled Chilean white wine. I have been reading the series of short communications written by Association members and others in greetings of our conference. Like my editor I extract some paragraphs from what these say about where our profession is heading, and what advice we have for our young colleagues.

Thus, my good friend Urban Jonsson tells us that we have to move from the 'science of nutrition' to the 'science of nutrition issues in society'. Barrie Margetts adds that nutrition is not just thinking about where nutrients come from; it has more to do with thinking about how society works. Barry Popkin says that as a profession we have avoided fighting for massive changes, and instead have focused on small

educational and such-like efforts, rather than taking on the major causes of the problem and seeking meaningful solutions that will benefit the poor.

These comments remind me of a fitting observation I filed away ten years ago quoting David Gordon, an epidemiologist and social critic, now director of the Townsend Centre for International Poverty Research at the University of Bristol. Here was his advice:
'Do not smoke, and if you can't, smoke less. Follow a balanced diet, eat lots of fruits and vegetables. Keep physically active. If you drink, do it in moderation. Protect yourself against the sun. Practice safe sex'. And he adds:

'Do not be poor, and if you are, stop being poor. If you cannot, try not to be poor for too long. Do not live in a depressed and poor area of town. If you do, move and go and live elsewhere. Do not work in a stressful, poorly paid and manual job. Do not live in a substandard house. And surely, do not be homeless'. Need I say more, to complement what my colleagues said in what for me are their key paragraphs?

Agneta Yngve asks: 'What is on trial: nutrition and chronic disease? Or misinterpreted science, media havoc and the sound of silence from peers?' I wish she had been more explicit and said: 'Silence from and inaction by our peers and by decision-makers regarding the role of transnational corporations in affecting nutrition and non-communicable disease'. Nothing new here; I am just echoing the clamour of civil society in the Occupy movement in New York last year.

Ricardo Uauy advises our young colleagues not to accept only what is possible. He says 'Your job is to make what appears to be impossible, possible. That is your challenge…. The future belongs to the bold and courageous, so time is on your side. To navigate against the wind, is the real challenge. Courage is tested when you are swimming contrary to the current. If you are convinced enough you have to be willing to go at it alone if necessary'. I read this twice and then three times. I began to wonder if in my golden age I had found undying youth, since I am such a navigator against the wind…

Which brings me to quote three Haikus (the short, three-line Japanese poetical genre) written by my friend Jerry Koenig in New York. He wrote:

Where are the elders
Those wise minds who offered choices
They're not gone - they're us.

Also:

Prioritising
Aside from having four i's
Keeps one's goals in sight.

Furthermore:

Never take guilt trips
As baggage must be paid for
And it may journey to nowhere.

I also advise young colleagues: Never be accused of a lack of imagination. Thus, from my dear friend Albino Gomez in Buenos Aires:

'Once there was an owner of a circus who reckoned he had seen everything. A poor man came by to offer to work for the circus. The owner asked him what it was that he did, and the man offering his services shyly told him that he imitated birds. The owner brushed him aside, saying that he was not interested. So, the good man flew away'.

cschuftan@phmovement.org
www.phmovement.org
www.humaninfo.org/aviva