

Hon. K S Bhalla's keynote speech on FICAC - Birth, Growth, Aims & Achievements - at European Consular Conference in Brussels on 23 February 2012- FICAC News April 2012



Hon. Kartar Bhalla, Chairman, FICAC South Asia Regional Committee, noted that FICAC has become globally known and recognised.

By Kartar S. Bhalla

Chairman, FICAC South Asia Regional Committee and Vice-President Emeritus of the Honorary Consular Corps Diplomatique-India

FICAC, also called World Federation of Consuls, was founded in Copenhagen on 2nd October 1982 by a small group of visionaries led by Consul General Vagn Jespersen of Denmark. The countries present at the meeting and first signatories were Finland, Greece, Iceland, Italy, Norway, Sweden and Denmark. This body gave consuls of the world a much-needed forum to share experiences and coordinate efforts to enhance their status and effectiveness and to bring together consular associations and corps from all around the globe. The World Federation of Consuls has United Nations recognition as an NGO with ECOSOC status. It is recognised as an NGO by the Organisation of American States. It is also recognised as an NGO at the European Union. On 17th September 2010, the World Federation of Consuls signed a partnership agreement with the Prince Albert II Foundation of Monaco, a foundation created by His Serene Highness Prince Albert II to work in the fields of environment and climate change.

FICAC has spread wide and fast. Today, it has over 87 member-associations and affiliated members. It has been holding periodic conferences to strengthen bonding among consuls and to channel their experience in professional fields. After the first meeting of founding fathers in Copenhagen in 1982, the Federation held two more

meetings in Copenhagen on 26th October 1984 and 9-10 October 1986 to draw up a working Constitution, called Copenhagen Statutes, and give shape to the world body.

Since then, World Congresses and General Meetings have been held every three years. The First General Meeting, later also called World Congress of Consuls, was held in Vienna, 22-24 April 1988. It was attended by 132 honorary consuls from 21 countries.

The 2nd Conference was scheduled to be held in Athens in April 1991 but it was cancelled in autumn of 1990 due to the impending Gulf War. The 3rd Conference took place in Monaco, 16-18 November 1992. It was opened by His Serene Highness Prince Albert of Monaco. The 4th International Congress was held in Cyprus (Limassol) from 25-28 May 1995. About 90 honorary consuls and their spouses were present. Consul General Vagn Jespersen, who had been President of FICAC for 13 years since its foundation in 1982, was elected Honorary President for Life. Eilat (Israel) was the venue of the 5th Congress, 11-14 May 1998, at which a new Constitution was agreed upon. An Agreement between FICAC and FUCHE (Federation of European Consular Associations) in the form of Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) was ratified unanimously admitting all members of FUCHE into FICAC. But, unfortunately, the MOU did not work in practice.

The 6th Congress was held in Curaçao, Dutch Caribbean, 15-17 May 2000. Among the keynote speakers was the Prime Minister of the Netherlands Antilles, His Excellency M A Pourier. The next Congress was supposed to take place 18-21 May 2003 in Seville (Spain) but due to some internal problems amongst members of the Spanish Consular Corps, it did not materialise. The 7th World Congress of Consuls was then held in Athens (Greece), 24-25 November 2003. The FICAC Constitution was amended at this Congress. Through two resolutions passed at this Conference, FICAC appealed to all the States to issue distinctive number plates for the cars of honorary consuls and introduced the honorific title of "Hon." before the names of all honorary consuls.

In the 8th World Congress of Consuls held in Montego Bay (Jamaica), 4-9 November 2006, the new President, Arnold Foote, made a pledge to change the centres of influence of the Federation to be more inclusive towards Asia, Africa, the Americas and the Caribbean. The 9th World Congress was held in Izmir (Turkey), 14-18 November 2009. The next triennial General Assembly/Congress will be held in Monaco in November 2012.



US Congressman Dan Burton (centre) and his wife Dr. Samia Burton (left) with FICAC members (from second left) Hon. Dr. Mirza Ihktiar Baig, Hon. Robert Blum, Hon. K.L. Ganju, Hon. Count Niccolo Caissotti di Chiusano, Hon. Marko Smole and Hon. Kartar Bhalla.

FICAC has been led by the following distinguished persons since its inception:

- Consul General Vagn Jespersen of Denmark, 1982-1995
- Consul General Andreas Mavrommatis of Cyprus, 1995-2000
- Consul General Peter Gad Naschitz of Israel, 2000-2003
- Consul General Roland Dahlman of Sweden, 2003-2006
- Consul General Arnold Foote of Jamaica, since 2006

The year 2006, under President Arnold Foote's leadership, marked a watershed in the history of FICAC opening out new vistas and new horizons and expanding FICAC's reach, aims and activities. A new logo for FICAC, FICAC News, FICACWORLD website were designed, created and produced. FICAC International Trade Expos and FICAC International Cultural Galas were started for the development of trade and culture between Sending and Receiving States. The FICAC decorations of honour, including the FICAC Gold Star, were envisioned, designed and produced. The historic occasion of the 25th Anniversary of FICAC, which fell on 2nd October 2007, was celebrated by holding regional conferences in Thailand, Brazil, Finland, Turkey, Czech Republic, Africa, Monaco, Dubai, Dominican Republic, Philippines and India. These conferences were inaugurated and addressed by heads of governments and foreign ministers. At these conferences, Medals of Honour and Special Medals of Honour were awarded to honorary consuls who had rendered distinctive service to their consular corps and FICAC.

The FICAC Gold Star was created as a mark of highest honour in recognition of the excellent work of world leaders and was awarded to heads of states/governments, namely, the Prime Minister of Jamaica, the President of the Republic of Turkey, Prince Albert II of Monaco, the President of Ghana, the President of the European Council, the President of the Philippines and His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI. The new administration of FICAC opened two new windows opportunity for honorary consuls to work: to promote direct trade between the sending States and the receiving States by holding trade fairs and to inspire consuls to turn into 'Caring Consuls'. To promote trade, the first trade fair was held in Jamaica in 2002 and it became an annual event to 2007. The Consular Corps of Jamaica's Trade Expo restarted in 2011 and would continue annually. It was followed by similar fairs in Bangkok (2007) and Manila (2010). The fairs were supported by the respective Governments and were highly successful.

To promote charity as part of consular activities, a FICAC/UNICEF programme was formulated to raise funds for the benefit of underprivileged children afflicted with HIV/AIDS. Funds were organised by Thailand consular corps and Indian consular corps for donation to UNICEF. A meaningful slogan for FICAC's outreach programme was coined: "Consuls turning caring into action". Another equally meaningful slogan chosen for FICAC is:

"FICAC ... WORKING HARD TO SERVE YOU BETTER".

While FICAC became globally known and recognised, there was one thing found wanting. Individual consuls of one State were not so well known in other States. To fill this void, a decision was taken in 2008 to produce a Who's Who of members of FICAC. Pursuant to this decision, material was collected from Consuls all over and in 2009, for the first time in the history of FICAC, FICAC Who's Who was published and released at the triennial Congress in Izmir. It contained the CVs of 430 consuls from 42

countries. Copies were distributed to all participating consuls and Governments of all countries. Disparity between career consuls and honorary consuls had been under discussion since the Accra Conference in 2008. In the Monaco regional conference 2009, the matter was considered in plenary session in detail and depth. Pursuant to the plenary body's decision, a resolution for review of the Vienna Convention on Consular Relations 1963, with a view to removing disparities between career consuls and honorary consuls, was adopted and the UN Secretary General and foreign ministers of all countries were approached to take initiative in this direction. The matter is being pursued with the aforesaid authorities and with the International Law Commission of the UN and the President of ECOSOC.

In 2009, at a conference in Dubai, President, Arnold Foote, presented "The Way Forward" programme, which was unanimously approved by the Board of Directors and launched at that conference. "The Way Forward" programme created new structures and detailed guidelines for each structure were designed. The FICAC world was divided into 14 regions with a separate regional committee in each region: East Asia, South Asia, South America, Central America, North America, Caribbean, East Europe, South Europe, West Europe, North Europe, Middle East, Western Africa, Northern Africa, Southern Africa. The FICAC regions are based on the United Nations categorisation. In addition, the Administration set up 18 subject committees to attend to numerous subjects of political, social and cultural importance.

The committees have done good work in the assigned fields. The Membership Committee has travelled far and wide to establish personal contact with consular associations of various countries and inspire them to affiliate with FICAC. The Consular Privileges Protection Committee has collected useful data on privileges extended to honorary consuls in various countries and has circulated the data to all member-associations. The Climate Change Committee has produced and circulated CDs and other material to drive the point home. At Izmir Congress 2009, an Izmir Declaration envisioning the future of FICAC was finalised and adopted. In this Declaration, FICAC resolved to:

- take FICAC to all countries to strengthen the consular movement
- bring all consuls of the world under the banner of FICAC
- work towards the establishment of new member-associations and their affiliation with FICAC
- bring estranged States and consuls back to FICAC
- work for removal of disparities between career consuls and honorary consuls
- intensify efforts to improve the status of honorary consuls and create an ambience in which they can discharge their functions with dignity
- expand the role of the honorary consuls to encompass full range of economic, trade, cultural, political and diplomatic relations
- call upon Directors and Chairmen of regional and subject committees to enhance status and standing of World Federation of Consuls in all regions and countries.

Noting that many Governments had laid down Codes of Conduct/Ethics for their diplomatic service officers including career consuls, in 2010, the FICAC Board of Directors laid down "Guidelines for the Honorary Consuls" who are affiliated to FICAC.

A Horse Race in the name of FICAC was instituted in Istanbul (Turkey) in 2010. The second FICAC Horse Race was held at the Istanbul Hippodrome on 21st September 2011.

His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI received President of the World Federation of Consuls, the Honourable Arnold Foote OJ, along with Secretary General of FICAC, Hon. Aykut Eken and seven other Directors of FICAC on 11th May 2011 at the Vatican. A framed FICAC Gold Star and citation was presented to His Holiness on behalf of all the members of the World Federation of Consuls by President Arnold Foote. The President, Secretary General and Directors of World Federation of Consuls also had the honour of audience with His All-Holiness Bartholomeos I, Ecumenical Patriarch, Archbishop of Constantinople, on 23rd September 2011 in Istanbul.

While FICAC had spread in all continents, it had not made much of a mark in the USA. On 18 January 2012, President, Arnold Foote, accompanied by senior directors of FICAC, met Congressman Dan Burton, Chairman of the US House of Representatives and Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of Congress, Congresswoman Yvette Clarke, Congresswoman Virginia Foxx and Congressman Alcee Hastings in Washington DC and apprised them of the aims and objects of World Federation of Consul, its role towards the consular associations worldwide and the relations it has established with the international organisations.

Congressman Dan Burton was gracious enough to agree to be the guest speaker at February's European Regional Conference.

Excellencies, before concluding, let me share with you what heads of states and governments think of Honorary Consuls:

Sri Lanka: Addressing honorary consuls of Sri Lanka on 19th January 2009, President Mahinda Rajapaksa said: "Your role as honorary consuls is as important as ambassadors representing our country. Indeed, I consider all of you as de facto ambassadors."

Malaysia: Addressing Honorary Consuls of Malaysia on 28th March 2007, Dato' Seri Syed Hamid Albar, Malaysian Minister of Foreign Affairs, said: Your contribution is more profound because you do this job without any compensation from the Government of Malaysia.

Turkey: On 13th November 2008, while receiving the FICAC Gold Star on behalf of President Abdullah Gul of Turkey, Governor Cahit Kiraç said: "The service that honorary consuls and consulates give to the countries that they represent is indispensable."

Malta: Speaking to honorary consuls on 23rd November 2006, Prime Minister of Malta, Lawrence Gonzi, said: "We are not only aware of but also profoundly grateful for your commitment to this role. We also acknowledge that your dedication is driven by a personal sense of service and not by the pursuit of profit."

Netherlands: Admiring his honorary consuls, Prime Minister of Netherlands Jan Peter Balkenende said on 29th May 2006: "You are committed to serving the interests of the Netherlands, and its people. You are with us in good times and bad. You give us your time, your energy, your friendship, and your devotion. No price can be put on that."

Belgium: Speaking at the Conference of the Belgian network in the United States, Foreign Minister Karel De Gucht of Belgium said: "Honorary consuls are our ambassadors in the city or state where you live. You represent a piece of Belgium over there."

Czech Republic: Speaking to honorary Consuls and ambassadors of the Czech Republic on 2nd June 2008, Czech Prime Minister Mirek Topolánek said: "...a good honorary consul is a dream of every prime minister, every minister of finance and every minister of foreign affairs. He carries out his mission as a career diplomat, but free of charge without the right for immunity."

FICAC has succeeded in its prime aim of establishing professional bonding among consuls of the world. Interpersonal relationships and consular brotherhood have deepened. Get-togethers are frequent. Wideranging discussions on topics of mutual interest are common. Thanks to *FICAC Who's Who*, honorary consuls are now known all over and their biographies have a place of honour in the libraries of Foreign Offices. Honorary Consuls are now Honourable Consuls and in many countries they enjoy the privilege of displaying distinctive number plates on their cars. FICAC has arrived.