



Australian Association of Former International Civil Servants
(AAFICS)



VOL XXVIII

NEWSLETTER

**DECEMBER
2017**

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 other 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 57 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 printed and posted with funds from the AAFICS membership.

Dear members,

Welcome to our new members, and season's greetings to all our long-standing AAFICS membership. Nine United Nations retirees took up residence in Australia and joined AAFICS in 2017. We also said farewell to some very dear friends.

Things that we have done this past year

The AAFICS Note on payment of personal income taxation in Australia was rewritten, to better reflect recent changes in the legislation, and the outcome of the Macoun versus the ATO case which went to the High Court of Australia at the end of 2015. The judges decided that United Nations pensions were not an emolument under the International Organisations Act and were therefore taxable as a foreign income.

This AAFICS note has now been published on the FAFICS website and in the AAFI-AFICS Bulletin in Geneva, which reaches a wide

audience. The note also points out that the lump sum becomes taxable by the ATO if it reaches Australia more than 6 months after the official has left UN service.

The United Nations Joint Staff Pension Fund asked us to look for some 11 people who had not returned their Certificates of Entitlement for 2016 and who had not responded to repeated letters from the UNJSPF in New York. Jennifer Ashton (ACT), recently retired from UNHCR, proved to be an efficient sleuth, and with enviable nerdish skills of navigation through data bases and even exploring whereabouts through Google Earth. Only one person out of the 11 was an AAFICS member; of the remaining 10 we found 6. This exercise happens every year. If only every retiree from the UN in Australia joined AAFICS, we would have a greater chance of tracking down the missing CEs. The key moments of difficulty that cause people to forget to return their CEs are: long stays in hospital and the relevant

mail getting set aside; very long visits overseas; not notifying the UN Pension Fund about changes of address, especially when moving into retirement homes and aged care, and last but not least, new retirees not understanding that that scrappy computer-generated form actually has to be signed and returned to New York if the monthly payments are to continue.

Membership and fellow associations:

We kept friendly contact with the New Zealand association of UN retirees, where Mike Shone, ex Brisbane, is the president; and stayed in touch with some of the retirees in Fiji, where efforts are being made by Saula Raiwalui and others to set up their own association. We shared information with the NZ and Fiji retirees whenever we thought it would be useful, and it was a real pleasure to do so.

AAFICS State Coordinators also enjoyed meeting members over lunch or for coffees. The NSW retirees held a general meeting before their lunch in January this year and have another meeting scheduled for January 2018. As you will see from the next item below, there are 606 people in Australia who receive a payment from the United Nations Joint Staff Pension Fund. Of these around 260 are members of AAFICS. We pay to FAFICS, the Federation of Associations of International Civil Servants, dues of US dollar 1.50 for each of our members, each year.

A profile of the UN beneficiaries in Australia was kindly given to us by the Clients Services Staff at the UN Pension Fund. Each month the United Nations Pension Fund pays a total of 606 benefits to people whose official mailing address is in Australia. Here is the breakdown:

204 retirees whose average monthly net payment is USD 3,204
152 early retirees whose average payment is USD 2,695
123 deferred retirees who are paid an average of USD 1,404
114 surviving spouses, whose average payment is USD 1,640
8 disability beneficiaries whose average payment is USD 3,649
5 dependent children whose average payment is USD 296.
Of the 606 beneficiaries in Australia, 225 have kept their UN After Service Health Insurance (i.e. 37 %).
403 beneficiaries are paid on the US dollar track (67 %) and 203 (33 %) receive the Local Currency track i.e. the Australian dollar track. All the above information is valid for November 2017.

News from the United Nations Pension Fund.

For the last several years there has been a continuous stream of accusations of mismanagement against the senior management of the UN Pension Fund, and also accusations of insufficient rigor and ability towards the investment arm of the Fund, which underperformed and did not come up with the expected rates of return on investments. Some UN staff associations, in New York and Geneva had circulated petitions against the CEO of the Fund, and raised the same issues at UN meetings. Many of you have your names in the emailing lists of these UN blogs, and so are kept up to date with the staff associations' opinions of the Pension Fund management.

There is no doubt that the introduction of a new computer system called IPAS to cover all the operations of the Pension Fund, caused very significant delays in payments to new retirees and to surviving spouses and dependents.

At the United Nations Pension Fund Board Meeting, held in Vienna in July 2017, the Board was asked to support an increase in staff numbers in the Pension Fund's Client Services section, which all retirees would heartily support.

Also discussed and decided at the July Pension Board meeting was the recommendation that the contract of the CEO of the UN Pension Fund, Mr Sergio Arvizu, be renewed for three years rather than five. As you know, Mr Arvizu had been the target of a lengthy campaign by the UN staff associations in New York and Geneva, although it was very difficult to understand just how valid these criticisms were. Furthermore, Mr Arvizu had taken the position that two of his staff members, who were elected by the UN staff associations to represent them on the Pension Board, were not eligible to take their seats on the Board. This decision has very recently been overturned by the UN Administrative Tribunal.

Mr Arvizu's current contract ended on 31 December this year and the Secretary General Guterres has extended it for a three-year period, with an annual appraisal for each of the three years. We are really very glad that the Secretary General, Antonio Guterres, seems to be keeping an eye on the UN Joint Staff Pension Fund, and its investments. Of course, we are not yet seeing the impact of US President Trump's massive cuts to his country's contributions to the United Nations.

Shortly after the July Board Meeting of the UN Pension Fund, the person in charge of the Fund's investments (around 60 billion US dollars), Ms Carol Boykin, from the USA, resigned. She had been much criticised for the

poor performance of the investments, and for the weakening of the governance structures, such as the Investment Committee, which had not been convoked and listened to as in previous times.

The Secretary General of the United Nations, Antonio Guterres, moved very swiftly to find a new Representative for the investments of the UN Pension Fund. Mr Sudhir Rajkumar, from India, a long-time official of the World Bank Treasury, is an expert on public investment institutions and pension funds. We all have strong hopes that Mr Rajkumar who takes up his duties in January 2018, will set the investments on a much more solid performance path.

Your Home Addresses

All of the UN Pension beneficiaries in Australia will have received a letter dated 6 September and signed by the Chief Finance Officer of the Pension Fund, telling us that we must have physical home addresses registered with the Pension Fund (i.e. not a Post Box, or similar). This information on our physical whereabouts is to be given to the UN Pension Fund's bank, JPMorgan Chase. Under UNJSPF Administrative Rule B.4, our addresses are an issue of privacy of information and should not be divulged. We don't know the reason for this action. Perhaps it derives from US or international legislation concerning money-laundering or tax avoidance or funding terrorism. Our retiree representatives in New York have raised objections to this egregious breach of privacy rules, but so far it looks as though the procedure is to go ahead.

The UN Pension Fund has very recently introduced a new way to pay

our monthly benefits, using a new transmission file that conforms to industry standard in the format called ISO20022. This is the way our monthly benefits will be transmitted in the future. So please, all, keep an eye on your bank accounts in the coming months and tell us if things go wrong

The 2017 FAFICS Council in Vienna

The Federation of Associations of Former International Civil Servants (FAFICS), represents the UN retirees in the United Nations System, and more particularly at the Board meetings of the UN Pension Fund. While it is recognized by the United Nations, and its accumulated expertise and credibility as a spokesman for the retirees is widely acknowledged, it has no right to vote on issues at the Board of the Pension Fund. It is essentially an unpaid and voluntary association which must always keep an eye on its universality and credibility. This year the Council of associations which make up the Federation, met in Vienna at the UN International Centre.

AAFICS has participated in the FAFICS annual Council since 2005, and has great admiration for the expertise of the national associations present at the Council. This year in Vienna there were two AAFICS representatives at the meeting – Mary Johnson and Mike Sackett. By far the most interesting part of the FAFICS Council was the meeting with the CEO of the Pension Fund, Sergio Arvizu and some of his senior staff, and with the Investment Management Division. AAFICS tried to draw attention to the special problems associated with managing one's arrangements as we get older. We together with our New Zealand friends wrote a small paper on the most aged, based on our experience

and presented it to the FAFICS Council and the CEO of the Fund. A copy of this paper is given below. The current FAFICS leadership is up for renewal at the FAFICS Council in Rome in July 2018, having completed a four-year term. We hope FAFICS will elect a president who takes an interest in communicating as widely as possible including to serving staff and is able to maintain an objective viewpoint towards the UN Pension Fund. Perhaps it is time for FAFICS to shift to a fresh point of view with a president outside the usual circles – why not look for a new FAFICS president among the significant memberships in India, Mexico, or other Latin American countries, or Vienna or Paris in Europe, for example.

LOOKING AFTER OUR MOST ELDERLY RETIREES

*Paper presented by the AUSTRALIAN ASSOCIATION OF FORMER INTERNATIONAL CIVIL SERVANTS (AAFICS) and the NEW ZEALAND ASSOCIATION OF FORMER UNITED NATIONS OFFICIALS (AFUNO-NZ)
46TH FAFICS COUNCIL, 17 to 20 July 2017, in Vienna*

AAFICS and AFUNO-NZ wish to promote a discussion at the FAFICS Council on how to respond better to the needs of the most elderly UN retirees. Before the introduction of IPAS we were told by the UNJSPF that the new IT system would provide services that responded to these needs. However, we continue to receive appeals for help from our most elderly members.

At a certain stage in our increasing life span, often about 25 years after retirement, some of us make the transition from independent living to assisted living arrangements. This often involves selling and moving out of the house that has been home for a long time, into an aged care residential facility or placed under the care of family members. This move signals a significant change in the way we manage our lives and affairs and is usually a response to physical and/or mental fragility. By that time some of us may have become more anxious, more forgetful and more dependent on paid carers to look after us.

As a consequence:

We may forget to inform the UNJSPF of our changed address.

The long delays in reply from the Pension Fund increase our anxiety.

Often the Pension Fund does not acknowledge receipt of messages and the most elderly think their message has not been received.

The difference in the time zones with New York or Geneva may cause confusion about the best time to ring the Pension Fund call centre.

Passwords and UID numbers are mislaid, or forgotten

Paid carers may be careless with mail such as Certificates of entitlement.

Extended periods of sickness or hospitalisation may mean that mail is set aside and CEs not returned.

AAFICS is concerned with the Pension Fund's increasing reliance on Members Self Service. In the future most retirees will be very familiar with internet usage, but at this stage there are still many who do not have email or internet access. Access to the internet may be restricted in the aged care facility.

Here are some suggestions:

- It should be possible to identify the approximate age of a retiree from the UID number and the request dealt with more urgently. While we acknowledge that orderly queueing for an answer may be the proper equitable approach, we also believe the most elderly should receive preferential early responses

-The Members Self Service should allow addresses to be checked and next of kin or emergency contacts and their addresses to be registered.

- The Certificate of Entitlement should be printed on more substantial paper and have the appearance of an important communication. A surprising number of members tell us their carers or children have thrown out the CE. We understand there is a cost in this proposal so perhaps it could apply to CEs mailed out to over 80-year-old retirees.

- An emergency hotline, and a Pension Fund official designated as a guardian for the elderly. A balanced approach to the introduction of Members Self Service is needed, recognising that not all retirees can take on full responsibility for the data held in their name by the UNJSPF.

We hope FAFICS will recognise that there is a need to promote reflection and a discussion on these issues. A dialogue at FAFICS Council and with the Operations staff of the UN Pension Fund could identify ways of better responding to the needs of the most elderly UN retirees.

**Letter from AAFICS to the
Executive Secretaries of Health
Insurance Funds in the United
Nations system in Geneva.
This letter is to be posted in
January 2018 and will be**

**followed by similar letters to
Paris, Rome, and Vienna**

To: Patrick Goergen, Executive Secretary, UNSMIS (UNOG, UNHCR, WMO, UNCTAD, UNHCR, OHCHR, UNECE, ITC, UNCC)
Florian Leger, Executive Secretary, ILO Staff Health Insurance Fund
cc: Australian Permanent Mission in Geneva
cc: Staff Management Health Insurance Committees with retirees' representatives.

Re: The recognition/registration of
After Service Health Insurance in
Australia

We are writing to you with a request, long debated in our association, and to which we have dedicated much thought.

The various forms of UN ASHI are not recognised as valid health insurance schemes in Australia. This can result in an additional tax levy incurred because the retiree is believed not to have private health insurance. More significantly, it also means that the retiree may have difficulty obtaining private medical (and especially hospital based) services if the validity of the UN ASHI is not acknowledged. Full payment may be demanded up front. Some anxious UN pensioners are trying to amass enough and very significant funds in anticipation of problems to come. We seek your help in finding avenues for the Australian recognition of the Geneva-based ASHI schemes.

Here is the background:

United Nations beneficiaries of a United Nations Joint Staff Pension Fund pension in Australia currently number 606. Their work for the United Nations took place outside Australia, as with the exception of a very small

UN Information Centre and a small UNHCR office in the capital city of Canberra, there are no United Nations organisations or specialised agencies in any Australian states or territories. These 606 retirees (this number includes surviving spouses, and a few disability and child beneficiaries) bring into Australia by international superannuation transfers from the UN Pension Fund US 1,453,700 each month (November 2017 data).

On return to Australia, as to be expected, UN retirees encounter legislative obligations. The Australian Taxation Office defines UNJSPF benefits received in Australia as a "foreign income" and therefore subject to personal income tax. Health care is available to Australian residents through the Medicare scheme. It is partly funded by taxpayers who pay a Medicare Levy of 2 % of their taxable income, if their income is above a certain threshold. In the case of a low income no levy is paid. In other words, all Australian residents are covered by the national health insurance scheme, Medicare, with the exception of certain non-resident visa-holders. Several of our UN retirees have special non-resident visas which exclude them from Medicare. As a consequence they are entirely dependent on UN ASHI for health insurance coverage.

Medicare benefits cover public hospital facilities and doctors' services. Above a certain higher income threshold, the Government requires payment of an additional Medicare Levy Surcharge, on top of the Medicare Levy.

The Medicare Levy Surcharge is designed to encourage individuals to take out private hospital cover and to use the private hospital system to reduce demand on the public Medicare

system. It is a penalty/incentive approach.

The Medicare Levy Surcharge is payable if you have an income of more than AUD 90,000 for singles and AUD 180,000 for families. Taking out an appropriate level of private hospital insurance exempts you from the Medicare Levy Surcharge.

Of the 606 UNJSPF beneficiaries in Australia, 225 have chosen to retain their United Nations After Service Health Insurance, the premiums of which are deducted from their monthly benefits by the UNJSPF in New York, on instructions from the various UN staff health insurance schemes. These premiums are therefore part of their taxable foreign income from New York.

Their reasons for choosing to keep ASHI rather than the more economical Australian private health insurance cover are various: Pre-existing medical conditions that might exclude them from private schemes; possibility of choosing doctors and hospitals; much shorter waiting times above all, for major or emergency treatment. Having invested in premiums in the UN staff health insurance schemes for the years of their working lives and having intentions to travel outside Australia to visit family members during retirement (not covered by Australian health insurance), also figure.

Australian retirees who have an Australian superannuation or pension fund, do not pay tax on their pensions. They therefore do not have to pay a Medicare Levy, nor a Medicare Levy Surcharge. Because the UNJSPF pension is not classified as a pension in Australia, UN retirees above a certain income threshold, are liable to pay at least one and sometimes both these

Levies. The 225 UNJSPF beneficiaries in Australia who have retained ASHI coverage, submit claims to Medicare first and the residue of the cost to ASHI afterwards.

There are currently 38 health funds registered under the Australian Private Health Insurance Act 2007. Some of these are restricted (such as Defence Health, Navy Health and similar). Of the 26 open health insurance funds listed, some have their origins in multinational for-profit health insurance companies such as BUPA. All are deemed compliant with Australian legislation and therefore can provide private hospital cover that exempts the insured person from the Medicare Levy Surcharge.

None of the United Nations staff health insurance or ASHI schemes are listed in Australia under the Private Health Insurance Act 2007. (See list on the ATO website).

There are two consequences arising from the lack of recognition of the UN ASHI schemes under Australian legislation:

1. UNJSPF beneficiaries in Australia who pay UN ASHI premiums may be liable to pay the Medicare Levy Surcharge as well. Usually the UN ASHI premium, while substantially more expensive, provides much greater coverage than the minimum level of Australian private hospital insurance cover, whose main virtue is to provide relief from additional taxation as well as basic hospital coverage.
2. Most important, for our membership, is the great difficulty that arises at the time

medical attention is needed, and the Australian hospital or medical service refuses to acknowledge the validity of the UN ASHI cover. We have many instances of UN retirees in Australia, who are currently paying substantial ASHI premiums to your schemes, being rebuffed and rejected by Australian healthcare providers, because the ASHI schemes do not have a way of being recognised here. From our membership's cases, we can see that the biggest problem lies in lack of recognition of UN ASHIs by hospitals. To guarantee fees that may be in excess of AUD 100,00 is often extremely difficult in an emergency situation.

In fact, we are writing this letter to you because of the number of UNJSPF beneficiaries with ASHI cover who have gone through extremely frightening medical crises as a result of their ASHI cover not being known to the Australian healthcare provider. You might note that as a result people are trying to accumulate large sums of money so that deposits may be paid to the healthcare provider very rapidly in emergency situations. We cannot consider this to be an equitable solution.

We believe that the two third party administrators most present in the United Nations system, CIGNA and Allianz, have well-established contacts among the 26 health insurance funds listed in the Australian Private Health Insurance Act, and with local health care providers. We also see that the international staff at the United Nations Information Office in Canberra have UNSMIS coverage and therefore there may already be some

understanding among Australian Capital Territory health providers of UNSMIS as a valid health insurer.

We ask that you, as a collective group of health insurance executive secretaries for the Geneva-based organisations, seek the assistance of the Australian Permanent Mission in Geneva, to identify how to bring about recognition of the UN ASHI schemes under the Australian Private Health Insurance Act.

You will know best how this may be achieved. May we suggest in some cases you could conduct a negotiation with your third-party administrators in relation to the healthcare provider networks they have access to in Australia. We have learned that the Geneva-based self-administered health insurance schemes (ILO, WHO and the United Nations Staff Mutual Insurance Society against Sickness and Accidents UNSMIS) have achieved recognition as accredited insurers by the Swiss Government through the channels of the Swiss Mission in Geneva. This has encouraged us to raise our long-standing concerns with you. We understand that the Note Verbale regarding Swiss Health Insurance Law states:

Retired international civil servants will, as before, be able to request for themselves and family members an exemption to the obligation of insurance with a Swiss health insurer and keep the insurance offered by their former International Organization. This request will need to be made within three months following cessation of service.

We look forward to hearing from you, and remain at your complete disposal for any further information you might require from us.

(Signed by the AAFICS Coordinating Committee)

UN and Drones in Humanitarian Settings

Paul White is an Australian lawyer, who is employed through the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) to work within agencies such as UNHCR, UNICEF and WFP to promote inter-agency cooperation on the protection of populations of concern. Unlike the UN, NRC has a flexible retirement age, so Paul even in what we would call his retirement years, must come to terms with new technology and its impact on our work.

Paul writes...

UN humanitarians agree that the use of drones (sometimes called UAV or ‘unmanned aerial vehicles’) and related technology must be embraced because it can enhance the safety, dignity and rights of disaster-affected people by improving the humanitarian response. Most agree also that drone technology is transforming the nature of power in some humanitarian settings and changing the nature of relationships between communities and humanitarian workers. Drone usage is working well in some situations. UNICEF is saving lives by using drones to move vaccines and blood samples in isolated areas. Drones bring a new level of mapping that strengthens UNHCR’s context analysis and bolster the efforts of WFP to provide “Wi-Fi in the sky” and to monitor situations in real-time.

Some humanitarians are concerned that the use of drones in humanitarian settings is not yet managed within a clear ethical or coordination framework and are subject to business and military rather than humanitarian influences. Others complain of a lack of humanitarian leadership on the issue within the UN and the humanitarian community generally.

In Nepal after the last big earthquake it became clear that drone enthusiasts

were keen to contribute to the humanitarian response, yet many were not aware of the humanitarian principles. Their involvement created protection problems due to a lack of understanding of humanitarian and protection principles that apply in such settings. Private organizations received media praise for quickly bringing in drones to assist relief efforts yet did not seek proper flight permissions from the government and did not share their data into a shared repository — rendering it nearly useless to other organizations. Some information was so ‘data-heavy’ it was not useful as it could not be downloaded. Some communities already traumatised felt alienated and complained because they were not consulted by drone operators. Communities were annoyed by so many drones flying over (news organisations as well as humanitarians) without communicating about the desperately needed assistance. NGOs questioned why we needed drones when in some places we could ring and ask people about their needs. Drones flying near security installations stoked Government fears the footage could be misused. A government official said “They flew everywhere but offered no feedback to the government. It was difficult to control them”. “Drone cowboys” can make things go badly wrong for humanitarians in the field. Another situation that may create complexities where humanitarians and development actors are involved arises when drones are used by military for military purposes. For example after a bombing of legitimate targets serious consequences may flow if development or humanitarian workers are suspected or accused of collusion with military because they have access to technology that is not understood in the community. Traditional civ/mil relationships change when drone

bombings are directed from a far-away bunker. Liaising, complaining and reparation for wrongs all become even more complicated when the bombing is directed by an intelligence agency rather than a military authority.

Imagine also the hurdles involved for UN Protection Officers when e.g. an intelligence agency indicates it is watching a gang rape through their drone technology. UN Protection Officers need to know these facts to respond to this gender based violence and possible war crimes. Yet unless clear protocols consistent with our protection principles about sharing this information in real-time are developed the chances of even attempting to prevent rape in this context evaporate. The issues surrounding the watching and recording of human rights abuses in real-time are confronting. The UN may collect evidence in this manner yet doing so may put the lives of victims at even more risk.

The humanitarian UN needs to up the ante on drones. Finding issues is not so difficult. Dealing with them and filling the gaps around the use of drones in humanitarian settings, especially while ensuring the protection of the most vulnerable who may be at risk of being left behind in the technology revolution is a challenge. The Centrality of Protection needs to be at the heart of developments. Gaps in coordination and leadership on drone usage need to be filled so each agency, fund, or programme does not establish its own drone programme in an uncoordinated network. Should the WFP lead the enterprise? It seems well positioned as a big humanitarian with UNHAS and Telecoms experience and already has support of the Government of Belgium to explore the use drones in humanitarian emergencies. WFP and Belgium led the first international humanitarian UAV coordination

workshop in February 2017, bringing together experts from the humanitarian, academic, government and private sectors. Or should UNHCR take the lead as it is best positioned to understand the protection aspects of drone usage that are so vital and neglected? If so, what role might OCHA play to ensure coordination?

Many workers in Protection, Clusters, Areas of Responsibility, NGOs and UN agencies are not yet up to speed on technological developments. And so not able to welcome with enthusiasm the many new players now appearing in humanitarian crisis, including those who have no protection awareness or humanitarian experience. Protection actors – not always noted for being au fait when it comes to technology - need to adapt to ensure the incorporation of humanitarian and protection principles into developments in the operational use of drones.

AAFICS helps prepare for rights dialogue

Jennifer Ashton, former UNHCR, and now retired in Canberra, participated in a consultation between the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) and community representatives on human rights in Vietnam.

Jennifer writes: AAFICS took part in a DFAT consultation in July with civil society representatives in the lead-up to the annual bilateral human rights dialogue with Vietnam on 4 August, the 14th such dialogue with Vietnam since the exchange began in 2002.

Australia holds bilateral human rights dialogues with Vietnam, China and Laos. DFAT is negotiating with a fourth, yet-to-be-announced, country on establishing a similar mechanism.

The recent NGO-DFAT meeting began with the announcement that Australia was now almost assured of a place on the UN Human Rights Council. Three contenders had been battling – diplomatically – for the two seats available (France, Spain and Australia) but France withdrew its candidacy in early July.

Meeting participants came mainly from Vietnamese community groups, with NSW, Victoria and South Australia all represented, one representing a national minority, the Kampuchea Krom community of the southern delta. Other organisations attending were the National Council of Women, Reprieve (against the death penalty), the Bahai, Law Council of Australia, Civil Liberties Australia and the Australian Association of Former International Civil Servants. Both DFAT and the Human Rights Commission attended.

DFAT pointed out Vietnam has the fastest-growing economic partnership with Australia, with economics now of far more importance than technical cooperation. Australia is one of a group of countries, with Norway, USA and the EU, which conducts the human rights dialogues. They are frank, cover difficult topics and, by holding Vietnam to account, may have some influence on policy development.

Nonetheless, respect for rights in Vietnam appears to be deteriorating by way of increasing arrests, arbitrary detention, lack of freedom of expression and harassment of bloggers and human rights defenders including through physical assault and bans on international travel. However, there are some areas of at least modest improvement in LGBTI rights, women and children, religion, and early release of some political prisoners.

It is to be hoped that the rights of the elderly can be incorporated into the dialogue agenda, given that there seems to be more scope for improvement for social groups. Although there is a tradition of respect for older persons, the combined forces of modernisation and the aftermath of a two-child policy could make older persons more vulnerable than in past decades.

Each Vietnamese group had prepared detailed submissions for DFAT and reiterated the finding of continued persecution of individuals and entities. Many mentioned Mother Mushroom, a blogger who wrote parenting tips until she visited a hospital and was appalled by the treatment of those unable to pay; she was temporarily arrested in 2009 for writing about the environmental impact of a Chinese owned bauxite mine and was finally

jailed for 10 years in 2017 after trying to visit an imprisoned political activist.

There were calls for increased contact with civil society.

Delegates to the meeting raised the Formosa environmental disaster. A Taiwanese steel manufacturing company spilled toxic waste into the sea that resulted in massive fish death – could Australia provide assistance for the victims, including to obtain government redress? The Vietnamese Women of NSW called for a ban on fish sauce importation. For those who use fish sauce, you will be pleased to know that there is now a ‘Vietnamese’ brand being manufactured in Sydney. DFAT reaffirmed its new focus on business and human rights as a possible mechanism for broaching environmental issues.

Voice, an international NGO, brought along Mrs Nguyen Thi Kim Lien, mother of prisoner of conscience, Dinh Nguyen Kha, who is currently serving a six-year sentence for distributing pamphlets critical of the Vietnamese government. The exemplar of the suffering mother, she thanked Australia for its efforts to date. Voice called for asylum for political prisoners and noted the need for visits to prisoners.

Interestingly, the Kampuchea Krom put forward a plea for indigenous

rights and spoke of desecration of monuments (the gates to their region), arrest of religious leaders and non-recognition of traditional land rights of monasteries.

After the meeting, I asked some of the participants about the Montagnards, a group of hill tribes who have been resettled in North Carolina USA. This group, which had helped the US during the Indo-China war, have been the subject of much of the documentation emanating from the USA on human rights abuse. The general feeling was that the Kampuchea Krom have yet to be recognised as an indigenous people; the Montagnards have their ethnic rights respected.

CLA and Reprieve both affirmed that common ground could be found between the more general human rights groups and those specifically focused on Vietnam.

CLA President Kristine Klugman commented on the value in NGO representatives meeting with the Vietnam delegation when they visit Australia, citing the very successful meeting with the Chinese delegation previously, when the issue of the death penalty was raised, and the Chinese stated (publically for the first time worldwide) that abolition of the death penalty is the aim of the Chinese government.

The Annual General Meeting of the NSW branch of AAFICS, will meet at the Kirribilli Flying Yacht Squadron on Thursday 25 January 2018. The AGM will be followed by lunch. Interstate visitors are warmly welcome.

The UN Pension Fund website is at www.unjspf.org

Most of us find it difficult to get in touch with the UN Pension Fund or to get a response to our emails or telephone calls. We are gradually all learning that it is more efficient to go to the UNJSPF website and use the self-service system. However, there are certainly occasions when we just have to get in touch with officials in the Pension Fund, so that pressing problems can be solved.

We suggest that emails regarding personal issues be sent to:

Maria Clarissa O'Donnell, Chief of Operations at the UNJSPF, New York. Her email is: o'donnell@un.org

Mail your letters to: UNJSPF s/c United Nations PO Box
5036 New York, NY 10017 USA, 10163-5036

Email: New York: unjspf@un.org

UNJSPF c/o Palais des Nations CH-1211 Geneva 10
Switzerland

Email: Geneva: unjspf.gva@unjspf.org

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