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Holding centre stage at IMO

Geoff Garfield
HANDRIKA Prasad Srivastava's enthusiasm for tennis used to lead him on a regular pilgrimage from his native India to the All England Tennis Club's annual extravaganza at Wimbledon.

Since the title of secretary general at IMO brought with it the unexpected bonus of working only eight miles from the hallowed venue, it might have been assumed that C. P., as he is often referred to, would be an even more frequent visitor.

Nothing, as things transpired, could have been further from the truth. Taking centre court for the past 15 years at IMO has meant that Mr Srivastava's commitments, both at the organisation's headquarters on the south bank of the River Thames and in meetings around the world, have virtually curtailed his Wimbledon outings.

Leisure time has for many years been at a premium for IMO's soon-to-retire supreme who has visited 75 of the organisation's 133 member countries during his period of tenure — many of them more than once. The pressure of being at the sharp end of a United Nations organisation for so long might have proved too great a burden for lesser mortals, but for Mr Srivastava — despite his 70 years — life without IMO remains "unthinkable."

Rising usually before 6am, he starts the day with two or three cups of tea before setting off from his flat in London for the office at 4 Albert Embankment. He used to live in Oxted, Surrey but the trials of commuting persuaded him to move closer to his base — and with it the benefit of being near to London's theatreland.

"I don't think there is anywhere else in the world with better theatre," he says, eagerly switching the conversation to his recent visit to The Westminster which has been staging Oscar Wilde's An Ideal Husband.

and within less than 20 years there was a tenfold increase in the world tanker fleet. In the 1950s it was normal to wash the tanks with water and pump the waste oil mixture into the seas — a practice which was curbed by the 1954 Oilpol Convention. In 1969, Oilpol was amended so that washings from tank cleaning were pumped into a special tank, allowing separation and recovery of the oil.

The Torrey Canyon disaster in 1967 led IMO to tackle the thorny issue of compensation in the event of major oil spills and an international fund was established in London. Limits of pollution compensation liability were greatly increased in May, 1984, although there is still a shortfall of countries willing to implement the new $250m ceiling, not least of all the prime mover, the US.

Further steps have since been taken by IMO to counter pollution by oil and other so-called "vessel source" materials including chemicals, garbage and sewage — currently there are 75,000 ships operating around the world.

"Pollution will become an extremely important item on IMO's agenda in the coming biennium," says Mr Srivastava, reflecting on the fact that the recent Paris summit called on IMO to tackle the issue of oil spills globally. "I think it will become item number one, and quite rightly so. The Exxon Valdez has shaken the world, just as the Torrey Canyon and Amoco Cadiz did.

"It (pollution) is a menace that has to be tackled at the very highest political level," he says — a responsibility that the heads of government have placed squarely on IMO's shoulders.

"The oceans do not divide, they unite," says Mr Srivastava who, well aware of the limitations facing developing countries, believes that the UN should allocate more resources to safeguarding the environment.

Geoff Garfield talks to CHANDRIKA SRIVASTAVA
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"My experience in India was invaluable for my assignment at IMO because it imparted a deep feeling for not only the commercial, legal, operational and global aspects of shipping," says Mr Srivastava. "I became aware of the crucial importance of the human factor at that time, so from that I took over the organisation I began promoting the idea of training according to global standards."

This remains the cornerstone of his philosophy and it came as no surprise when he is to stay on at the helm of the World Maritime University established by IMO in Malmo, Sweden in 1983.

The thrust of IMO's work has been to develop a comprehensive package of technical standards covering maritime safety and pollution prevention, but Mr Srivastava says he has long recognised the need to progress further than the initial framing of conventions and codes, by ensuring countries can overcome the problems they face in adopting them.

Consequently, several steps have been taken by IMO to promote implementation, including "hundreds of administrations with technically qualified people to enforce national laws based on international requirements."

Mr Srivastava repeatedly stresses that "these standards are not a burden" but an essential qualification when operating vessels internationally.

The "forum of IMO is of great benefit to those countries that cannot develop their own standards," which are the "common will of the people," says Mr Srivastava.

The years 1964 to 1966 were spent as joint secretary to India's prime minister, where his shipping commitments required the appointment of the chairman of directors. Before moving to IMO, he turned SCI into one of the world's largest shipping companies by amassing a fleet aggregating more than 5m tonnes deadweight.

"I received first-hand experience of the spirit — and it is extremely helpful in spirit of goodwill — we call it the IMO spirit because during the day there are so many meetings and people visiting. I allow about one-and-a-half hours for work at home which does not make me feel guilty. At weekends I am usually travelling or there is work to be done, although if there is a chance I like to get out in the country.

"Really, though, it is a 24-hour assignment. I do not know how these 15 years have passed — it seems only the other day."

His "open door" style of management suits an organisation with a relatively small secretariat of less than 300 people. "Everything is a gem, everyone does the best of their ability and the member states are obviously satisfied. My colleagues enjoy their work and feel they are contributing to the goal," he says, referring again to IMO as a "universal organisation.

Mr Srivastava himself has been married for 42 years to Nirmala who shares his love of classical music — both Indian and European as well as cricket. Nirmala, he says, is viewed by some as a spiritual leader who firmly believes that "all human beings, regardless of status, race, colour or gender" are capable of leading good lives.

The couple have two daughters, Kalpana and Sadhana, and four grandchildren, all of whom live in India. The daughters occasionally visit him in London, but on stepping down as IMO's secretary general, Mr Srivastava intends to see more of them by dividing his time equally between the UK and India.

Born in the United Provinces — later renamed Uttar Pradesh — Mr Srivastava was educated in his home town of Lucknow where, among his various academic achievements, he attained first class BA, BA (Hons) and MA degrees. A fervent interest in political science, developed in his early days, has been an enduring feature of