

# THE CIAP BULLETIN

# INTERPRETASIA

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## EDITORIAL

**T**he need to truly understand different languages and cultures is no more apparent than at international gatherings of people from different parts of the world. Whether the discussion is on human rights and how they are perceived, a political platform to be agreed by a group of countries, or the adoption of consumer protection standards, the meaning behind the words is crucial.

In this issue we explore the role of interpreters in grasping what others have to say in one language and conveying the meaning of their message in another language. Interpreters do this not only in meeting rooms, but also during field trips, be it at a human rights seminar in Cambodia or a peace forum in Sri Lanka.

We are sure that you will enjoy reading about the difficulties of the profession on a typical day in the life of an interpreter in this issue's lead article.

*The Editors*

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## A Day in the Life of an Interpreter

The interpreting profession has suffered from a lack of understanding and recognition from the general public and even from users of interpretation for many years. Recently, however, Hollywood came to our rescue with the film *The Interpreter*, starring Nicole Kidman, which gives viewers some idea of the interpreting profession.

What does an interpreter really do? Who is an interpreter? What skills are required? How does she or he work before, during and after each assignment?

The common belief is that an interpreter is the linguistic intermediary between two or more parties who do not speak the same language. However, an interpreter is much more than that. An interpreter is a facilitator of communication who can bridge language and cultural differences; an excellent public speaker skilled in



simultaneous and consecutive interpreting; the peacemaker, the confidant of delegates, the poet, the comparative terminologist, the linguistic expert who must have the appropriate university training and experience.



Australia-based AIIIC interpreter Susana Hovell at work

An interpreter must have a sea of knowledge one fathom deep and be well informed about current affairs. Here is how I handle a 'normal' working day.

**6.00 am:** *It's 6 am and I have to be in the conference centre at 8.30. I still feel a little jet-lagged. I flew into Singapore yesterday and really should not complain: my colleagues from Europe had an extra rest day to recover but they have a six to eight hour time difference. Thank goodness for the travel and rest days, otherwise we would really make a poor showing on the first day of the conference.*

**7.30 am:** *I am rather nervous. The conference is highly technical which is why three interpreters have been assigned per booth. I have been preparing the conference for the past month and have worked at three meetings on the same subject, so I shouldn't be nervous. However, nerves seem to help me concentrate more and perform better.*

*The more years you work in this profession the less cocky you get about how well you perform. My goal is to ensure communication between delegates who speak different languages and come from different cultures while ensuring that my interpretation is accurate, pleasant to listen to and impartial.*

*Before breakfast, I listen to the news and read the daily newspaper to make sure I'm up to date with what is happening in the world. You really feel like a fool when a delegate expresses condolences to a fellow partici-*

*pant for the devastation wrought by a natural disaster that occurred overnight and you know nothing about it.*

**8.00 am:** *After breakfast I head off to the conference centre. There are three teams working at this conference, all coordinated by a senior colleague who really knows the ropes. Our coordinator is a versatile interpreter who can also replace a colleague who is sick, late (heaven forbid!) or otherwise unavailable. It's great to have a contingency plan to cover Murphy's Law: 'if something can go wrong, it will'.*

*such as 'American exceptionalism'. I admire my colleagues in the Arabic and Russian booths who seem to have come up with expressions that please their respective chief negotiators as they are thanking the interpreters for their suggestions.*

**12.30 pm:** *It's lunch time. We have been working half-hour turns in the booth. During the breaks, we quickly prepare relevant documents and search the internet for information. We interpret meaning, not words, but to do this we must have a full understanding of every aspect of the conference.*

**2.30 pm - 5.30 pm:** *Both delegates and interpreters find it hard to focus during the post-lunch session, also known as the 'graveyard slot', but we must listen, understand, decipher and transfer the meaning of sometimes incomprehensible accents into our working languages, take note of the terminology being used by the delegates and concentrate.*

*The most professional setup, which is favoured by the UN, is to have each booth working into a single language, where the quality of interventions into that language is always guaranteed. However, on the private market, I also work in bilingual booths, which are challenging, but can work very well.*

*The day is over. The chairperson thanks the delegates for their contribution and does not forget to thank the interpreters. ■*

**An interpreter**



Interpreters at the ICEVI 2006 Congress, Kuala Lumpur, July 2006

**8.30 am:** *I am working with two colleagues I do not know yet. They are true professionals and we immediately put each other at ease by working out the ground rules in the booth and deciding who will be doing what; documentation, suggested terminology, operating the relays, changeovers, etc.*

**9.30 am:** *The plenary starts. It's a UN meeting considering, amending and approving a new draft treaty for submission to the relevant ministers for adoption. We really must be spot-on with terminology, and even create new expressions in other languages*



## Communicating on Human Rights

by Jean-Pierre Allain

Not so long ago, CIAP was requested to provide interpreters and simultaneous interpretation equipment for an international seminar on Culture and Rights: Challenges and Opportunities for Human Rights Work that was held in Siem Reap, Cambodia. It was the second time that CIAP was working with a human rights education institution based in the United States that regularly brings together human rights activists in different parts of the world. As most of the participants were from Asia and Latin America, the sessions were conducted in English and Spanish.

The purpose of the seminar was to allow human rights activists to discuss how cultural rights, including those of minorities, are respected in the world and what to do when such rights are denied. This absorbing subject gave rise to many heated debates at which the interpreters played a vital role, ensuring communication between those who spoke English and those who spoke Spanish.

Cultural practices, beliefs, ceremonies and traditions are an integral part of human existence and, as such, as varied and complex as the lives of as many different communities and groups. The words, expressions and language used to describe such practices,



Seminar participants in the floating community centre on Tonle Sap Lake listen to explanations about the life and culture of the fishing community

beliefs and traditions are often clearly local and vary greatly, even within countries that have a main or majority language.

The interpreters were often faced with descriptions of situations or beliefs expressed in Spanish that did not have an equivalent in English, and vice versa. In such cases, the interpreters had to become comparative terminologists and coin a new term or propose a solution. This was often confirmed by speakers of both languages, or discussed and agreed between the participants and the interpreters during breaks.

Throughout the seminar there was close cooperation, one might even say symbiosis, between the

participants and the interpreters, who, from the start, were made part of the group. They also joined participants on a fascinating field trip to floating fishing villages on the Tonle Sap Lake, which covers a large chunk of central Cambodia. The visit included a school and health centre, also floating constructions, as well as a church and the community centre, where community leaders provided a briefing in their local language which was interpreted into English by a Cambodian participant, and then into Spanish by the CIAP interpreters.

This seminar was a clear example of how true communication between people of different languages and cultures can be ensured through professional interpretation. Indeed, the speed of some of the speakers and the highly varied and often uncommon expressions could not have been correctly conveyed in the other language had the interpreters not been qualified professionals with many years of experience. ■

*Jean-Pierre Allain is a consultant interpreter based in Bangkok, one of the founding members of CIAP and former President of AIIC.*



Participants boarding the boat to go out to the floating village on Tonle Sap Lake

## Malaysia hosts the Non-Aligned Movement again

by Socorro Browning and Jean-Pierre Allain

In May 2006, the Malaysian government hosted a ministerial meeting of the Non-Aligned Movement's (NAM) Coordinating Bureau at the state-of-the-art Putrajaya International Convention Centre (PICC) in the new federal capital, 25 kilometres south of Kuala Lumpur. This was the last NAM ministerial meeting before the Presidency's handover to Cuba in September 2006 at the next summit in Havana.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) had asked the Malaysian National Institute of Translation (ITNM) to recruit simultaneous interpreters for English, Arabic, French and Spanish, the organisation's four official languages, with the proviso that the ITNM hire AIIC interpreters. With its stringent admission criteria, AIIC is the only internationally recognised body that ensures the quality of its members' interpretation. All CIAP associates are members of AIIC.

The request from the authorities had come just one month before the meeting. After contacting some interpreters directly, the ITNM felt that it lacked the knowledge and experience to put together a large team of 27 international interpreters at such short notice. It therefore asked CIAP to recruit all the interpreters on its behalf. ITNM and CIAP signed a cooperation agreement for this purpose.

### **Difficulties in recruiting several teams of interpreters for large meetings**

The Ministry insisted that the interpreters work in bilingual booths with English as the key language, assuming that this would facilitate communication with the local press and officials. Professionally, this is not the best arrangement for a truly multilingual

conference, where most participants may express themselves in any of the four official languages. Moreover, recruitment of interpreters becomes more difficult, because most interpreters work only into their 'A' language (usually their mother tongue) from several other languages. Here, bilingual interpreters with preferably at least three of the conference languages were required.

Furthermore, May and June are busy conference months. So, for instance, CIAP had to contact some 42 Spanish/English interpreters worldwide to find nine people to complete the team. By the very nature of their work, interpreters travel a lot, so responses take time. Some interpreters were available but flights to Kuala Lumpur at short notice were not. Others

different time zones. The number of travel days in a contract depends on where the interpreters come from and flight connections. All these details were entered into the quotation to the ITNM who, in turn, needed approval from the MoFA.

Despite the difficulties, CIAP succeeded in finding 27 interpreters with the necessary language combinations and prepared individual contracts between them and ITNM, establishing work, travel and rest days, daily subsistence allowances and airfares. CIAP arranged all flight details in conjunction with ITNM.

An important lesson learned from working with a large team of interpreters is that unforeseen problems can be quickly managed



Some interpreters at the NAM Ministerial Meeting in Putrajaya, May 2006

could not accept because of commitments just after the NAM meeting. These are the usual problems a consultant interpreter has to contend with, made more acute by the short lead time.

There are very few conference interpreters with English, French, Spanish and Arabic as working languages in Asia, which meant flying them in from Europe, America or Australia and factoring in airfares, travel time and rest days to cope with

by a non-working interpreter as team coordinator, an option the MoFA did not entertain. Fortunately, in the end, everyone was very pleased with the interpretation services. The ITNM has been recognised as a valuable partner and CIAP will maintain its reputation for excellence. ■

*Socorro Browning is a consultant interpreter based in Nice, France, and one of the founding members of CIAP. She lived in Asia for many years.*





J-P. Allain, CIAP associate, interpreting into Spanish for participants at a Peace Forum in a community centre in Sri Lanka, June 2006

## SOME INTERPRETATION TEAMS ORGANISED BY CIAP RECENTLY

### 2005

Nagoya	Jun	OECD Working Party on Territorial Policies in Urban Areas
Bangkok	Oct	AWID International Forum (Association of Women in Development)
Hong Kong	Nov	Cosmetics Conference
Hong Kong	Dec	IHLO-ICFTU Executive Meeting

### 2006

Hanoi	Feb	WDF Diabetes Summit Hanoi 2006
Bangkok	Feb	Thailand-Spain Business Forum
Kuala Lumpur	Mar	Third Asia-Europe Dialogue of Cultures
Kuala Lumpur	May	Non-Aligned Movement Coordinating Bureau Ministerial Meeting
Kuala Lumpur	Jul	ICEVI - World Congress of the Visually Impaired
Bangkok	Jul	FTA Watch - Strategy Workshop on Free Trade Agreements
Beijing	Sep	WEF China Business Summit



◀ Briefing of interpreters before their first assignments at the AWID International Forum in Bangkok, October 2005

**Visit our website! [www.ciap.net](http://www.ciap.net)**

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## WHAT IS AIIC?

**F**ounded in 1953, **AIIC (Association Internationale des Interprètes de Conférence - International Association of Conference Interpreters)** is the only worldwide association of professional conference interpreters. AIIC has over 2,600 members in 89 countries and is recognised by the United Nations, the World Bank, NATO, the European Union and many business organisations as the only representative of professional interpreters and the authoritative voice on matters of conference interpretation.

AIIC sets professional standards and working conditions accepted worldwide. Together with the International Organisation for Standardisation, AIIC's Technical and Health Committee has drawn up standards ISO 2603 for built-in booths and equipment for simultaneous interpretation and ISO 4043 for mobile booths for use in conference rooms without built-in facilities.

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INTERNATIONALE DES  
INTERPRETES DE CONFERENCE

**aiic**

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## WHAT IS CIAP?

**C**onference Interpreters Asia Pacific (CIAP) is a network of consultant interpreters, all members of AIIC, who live and work in the Asia-Pacific region. Established in 1990, CIAP provides teams of conference interpreters for simultaneous and consecutive interpretation at meetings of all sizes.

Its members advise conference organisers on language requirements, choice of conference venues, technical requirements and even seating arrangements, and recruit teams of interpreters suited to the needs of a conference. CIAP also provides written translations of conference documents.

CIAP associates can provide simultaneous interpretation teams for English, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, French, Spanish, German, Italian, Portuguese, Russian and other languages.



**CONFERENCE INTERPRETERS ASIA PACIFIC**

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*There are CIAP Associates in several cities in Asia-Pacific. For the consultant interpreter nearest to you, please see the list of names and contact numbers provided in this issue.  
Website: [www.ciap.net](http://www.ciap.net)*