

INTERVIEW WITH THE PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL OF ICAO, DR. ASSAD KOTAITE



For almost 45 years, he has served the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) with distinction and pride. For the past two decades, as President of the Council of ICAO, he has criss-crossed the globe countless times meeting with Royalty, Heads of State and senior government representatives. Always the supreme diplomat. And always an ambassador par excellence for ICAO and its mission to make the world of civil aviation as safe, reliable and efficient as possible for the benefit of all.

In this exclusive interview, on the eve of the official opening of the new ICAO Headquarters, Dr. Assad Kotaite, President of the Council of ICAO, reflects on his early career and some of the Organization's major successes and challenges as we approach the beginning of a new century.

Dr. Kotaite, for 43 years now, almost as long as ICAO has been in existence, you have been a leading figure in the world of civil aviation. As a law student in your native country of Lebanon, was this ever your intention?

Absolutely not. In fact, as a Barrister in Beirut from 1948 to 1949, I began my legal career with one of two objectives. Either to become a Professor of Law or to become involved in international affairs. To be perfectly honest, the specialized field of civil aviation never crossed my mind.

So what changed your mind?

My whole life was to change in 1953 when I was appointed Chief of Legal Services for Lebanon's Directorate of Civil Aviation with specific responsibility for

International Agreements and External Relations. As such, I became a Member of the Legal Committee of ICAO advising my country on bilateral negotiations. Three years later, I was appointed Representative of Lebanon on the Council of ICAO.

These were my first contacts with the Organization and I realized that I had found my true vocation. For ICAO combined everything that I was searching for. Namely international affairs and the law.

Did you ever think that one day, you would be appointed to the most senior position in ICAO, let alone be re-elected for eight terms?

Never! However, on reflection and in all modesty, those early years were perfect training for the post in that I would like to believe that I gained invaluable experience in the complex and delicate art of negotiation. In essence, I learned how to find a workable solution with the agreement of different parties with diverse and sometimes widely conflicting priorities.

Indeed, over the years, I have learned that the real secret in any negotiations is to first identify an area of common ground, no matter how small, and then to build upon it. It may not be the ideal solution, but at least it is workable and acceptable to all. Moreover, in international affairs I firmly believe that one should avoid confrontation at all costs. It is essential that one listens to all parties and takes into consideration their point of view.

Could you cite a recent example validating this philosophy?

One only has to think of the crisis in February 1996 when two small civilian aircraft registered in the United States were shot down off Cuba. The government of Cuba claimed that it was protecting the sovereignty of its airspace. The US Government claimed that the unarmed aircraft were shot down in international airspace.

At the request of the United States, the Council considered the incident. In the light of the debate during which the two parties, Cuba and the United States, presented their views and taking into account that States should not use weapons against civil aircraft, the Council unanimously adopted a resolution to this effect presented by me.

Again, in June of the same year, the ICAO Council considered the report of investigation carried out by an ICAO team on the incident and adopted unanimously a resolution presented by me which was transmitted together with the report to the United Nations Security Council which practically endorsed the Resolution.

You seem to place great emphasis on the word sovereignty.

ICAO's work is based upon the fact that each of our 184 Member States is sovereign and has the sovereignty over its airspace. Also, that actual implementation of ICAO's standards and recommendations is up to each individual sovereign State. Having said that, it must be remembered that the *raison d'être* for these provisions is the safety of civil flights, and also the fact that should any State decide not to implement ICAO