

Personal Note

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Secretary General

Regular readers of The Judges' Newsletter are well aware of the surge of interest in the work of the Hague Conference in Latin America stimulated by presence in the region of a permanent representative of the Conference. The remarkable achievements of the regional office in Latin America, headed by our liaison legal officer, Ignacio Goicoechea, have proven that a regional presence can be of enormous value in strengthening ties between the Hague Conference and States, citizens, authorities and courts of that particular region.

While efforts to reinforce the regional office in Buenos Aires are ongoing and the work of our liaison legal officer continues to expand and deepen, this Latin American success has not remained unnoticed in other parts of the world, in particular in the Asia Pacific Region. The need for and potential of a presence of the Conference in the region, including the benefits it might bring to the Membership of the Conference as a whole, became increasingly apparent during four large Asia Pacific ("AP") meetings organized by the Hague Conference. AP1 took place in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah (Malaysia) in 2005, AP2 in Sydney (Australia) in 2007, followed by AP3 in Hong Kong (China) in 2008, and AP4 in Manila (Philippines) in 2011.

At each of these events, States and non-State actors – intergovernmental organizations and NGO's alike – from throughout the Asia Pacific Region gathered to discuss the relevance, implementation and practical operation of a number of important Conventions of the Hague Conference within the Asia-Pacific region, and recognized the increasing relevance and importance of the Hague Conventions on private international law both regionally and in a global context.

It was the then Secretary for Justice of Hong Kong, Mr Wong Yan Lung, who on the occasion of the AP3 meeting in Hong Kong, supported the idea of an Asia Pacific Regional Office established in Hong Kong. It took several years to turn the idea into a reality, but at its annual meeting in April this year, the Council on General Affairs and Policy of the Hague Conference was in a position to endorse the Permanent

Bureau's proposal to establish an Asia Pacific Regional Office for the Hague Conference in Hong Kong. The Council noted with gratitude that funding for the Office's operation was now ensured for an initial period of three years. The future directions and the question of the financial sustainability of the Office beyond this initial period would be decided by Council in light of a comprehensive evaluation.

And so, on 13 December 2012, the Hague Conference officially opened its first Asia Pacific regional office in Hong Kong. This festive event was attended by the Chief Executive of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of China, the Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs of China, the acting Secretary for Justice of Hong Kong SAR, his predecessor, and diplomatic and consular representatives from many Members of the Hague Conference based in Hong Kong. Significantly, on the same date, the Republic of Korea deposited with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in The Hague, the depositary of the Hague Conventions, its instrument of accession to the 1980 Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of Child Abduction, which, like other Hague Conventions, such as the 1961 Apostille Convention or the 1993 Intercountry Adoption Convention, is attracting increasing interest from the Asia Pacific Region.

The establishment of the new office, which is headed by Justice Michael Hartmann from Hong Kong, constitutes a major step in the strategy of the Hague Conference aimed at bringing its mission and work closer to various regions, in this case the Asia Pacific Region. Of course, this region covers a huge geographical area and is diverse in terms of legal systems, socio-economic development, culture, religion and politics. But the Hague Conventions are all designed to bridge such differences, because they are based on a realistic respect for (legal) variety. The new office will serve as a base of operations to promote the organisation, publicise the Hague Conventions, encourage wider ratifications and accessions, and support greater understanding of these instruments. The office will also coordinate events and seminars tailored to the needs of the Asia Pacific Region. As a result, it may be hoped and expected that States and their Central and author administrative authorities and courts throughout the Asia Pacific Region and indeed throughout the world, will strengthen their relationships with one another, and that their citizens will benefit from greater legal certainty, security and protection.