

The smoke of the inspector's pipe: digression on an experience

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José Roberto Tavares de Paiva

(with the cooperation of Ioná Ponce)

The image of the smoke coming out from a pipe transports me to a contemplative status in which the past and the present mix with each other, thus becoming an almost divinatory action by which the future can be visualized. At first glance, this does not seem to have the slightest relationship with nuclear safeguards, although I must say that, through this image, I can visualize moments of my history as an inspector and of events occurred in my life that have led me to reach this point. These are events that I just cannot enumerate; I can only make them arise ...

One more day. At last, the inspection was completed. I was tired. I had quitted after 7:30 p.m. The inspection had started at 8 o'clock in the morning; load the equipment, sit down, stand up, mount the multichannel, measure, bring the pattern to calibrate the scale, audit the records, oof...

Sometimes, the life of an inspector is very exhausting. I have already devoted Monday through Saturday, from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m., during three weeks, to a single inspection. However, I can assure that there is no claim by the inspector for this reason.

Where do our strength and our understanding come from? And everything is so scheduled, with millimetrically conducted very complex tasks, in addition to the inspection routine.... But... what routine? What am I saying? It is here where we find the charm and the attractiveness of the inspector's function: there are not two days alike; although the activities are well known, each inspection features by thoroughly different days, And, generally, each day, at a different place, in a different facility.

The work of a nuclear safeguards inspector is not only a complex one: it is a succession of specialized activities that are ruled by international standards resulting from agreements between countries and institutions. An inspector does not perform verifications in a facility just because there is a need to carry out a control. Exactly underlying the word control, there is a story marked by the effort of diverse nations

toward avoiding the proliferation of nuclear weapons and their use in wars and in terrorist actions. The time devoted by an inspector to the verification of a nuclear facility is valuable and, implicitly, it involves both a technical and a political nature.

The image of the smoke goes through my mind once more. I go back to my origins. The son of a migrant from the dry region of the Brazilian northeast, I spent my childhood on Fallet street, Catumbí, Rio de Janeiro. A peaceful street and a peaceful neighborhood at that time. Now, Fallet street is not in a shanty town that gives refuge to bandits who, frequently, cause the closure of the “United States” Municipal School, where I studied. I got rid of it and I do not go back to such place. When a teenager, my father, graduated as an accountant, started to work for the National Bank for Economic and Social Development (BNDES) and we moved to Rio Comprido, a quiet place, with our house backed by the low part of the Tijuca forest, near the residence of the Archbishop of Rio de Janeiro. The Turano shanty town has now taken up the forest and, with it, part of my roots.

As the roots were suffering, the stem and the leaves expanded in the search for light and my horizon grew immensely. I made all my studies in public schools and, in 1970, I started to study physics at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ). My attention and dedications were fully devoted to the areas of astrophysics, meteorology, hydrology and education. I even got to think about a master in education to teach physics. I spent almost one year at the National Observatory; however, when I graduated from college, a contest arose to work for Nuclebrás. Well... going nuclear? I adored relativistic physics, but I had never thought seriously about the nuclear field. Anyhow, it was worth trying.

I spent 27 years shared by Nuclebrás and Industrias Nucleares do Brasil (INB). I learned a lot. It was there where I gained my technical knowledge and my living experience, which I still keep and will serve to expand my horizon even more. At the Factory of Nuclear Fuel (FCN / INB), in Rezende, Rio de Janeiro, I developed and implemented safeguards. I also cooperated in licensing, radiological protection and in the assessment of the environmental conditions in the region.

In 1994, I started my career as inspector for the ABACC and, in 2002, I moved to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), in Vienna. While working for the Agency, I crossed the Atlantic 8 to 10 times per year and shared my time with other inspectors from all over the world.

This year, I returned and have already rejoined my friends at the ABACC. Now, the past, the present and the future mix themselves up in the “smoke” once more. I know that other inspections and other challenges are yet to come. The scenario of safeguards and of the non proliferation of nuclear weapons is transforming worldwide and I am certain that I can comply once more with the noble tasks of an inspector in Brazil and Argentina. A task of those who do also help to build Peace among nations and who perceive its importance to the extent in which they get to know new landscapes, new cities, new facilities and new relationships with different people and different cultures. For an inspector, this can mean both a gift and a great responsibility.