

A geophysicist is invited to the U.N. for a mission

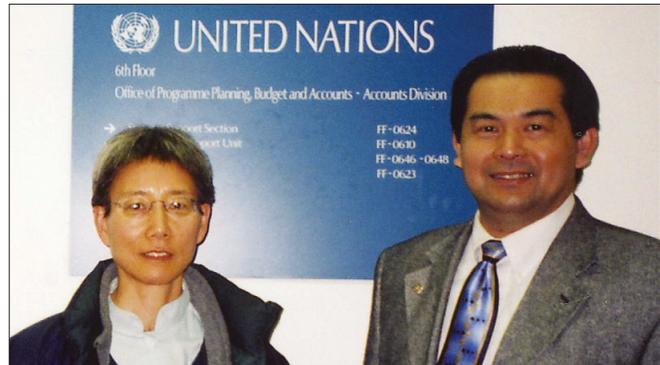
DEAN CLARK, *TLE* Editor

In this era of unending viral assaults on computers and associated junk email (often offering the chance for incredible wealth), most personal computer users are suspicious of messages from unknown and/or unlikely origin. That certainly describes long-time SEG member Lawrence M. Gochioco (former chairman of the *TLE* Editorial Board) when he received email, supposedly from a senior consultant at the United Nations, in July 2004 that invited him to visit U.N. headquarters in New York.

The skeptical Gochioco initially ignored the message but the messenger was persistent. Gochioco then made a few telephone calls and, to his surprise, confirmed that his determined correspondent, Jean Chu, was indeed a senior consultant with the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) who had made frequent trips to Asia in the last few years under the auspices of UNICAND (United Nations Initiative on Community Awareness and Action for Natural Disasters)—a global program to disseminate experiences and technologies for disaster mitigation in developing countries. The program includes projects/activities to improve the capacity of disaster-prone communities to anticipate and mitigate large and sudden natural disasters such as earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, typhoons, tsunamis, etc. Chu had gotten Gochioco's name from geoscientists in Asian countries where his Phillipine upbringing, diverse geophysical expertise (environmental geophysics in particular), and past editing experience were qualifications the U.N. was seeking to help implement a network between communities, scientists, and public administrators in third world areas that are most prone to large-scale natural disasters.

After learning of his background, Chu did not hesitate to contact Gochioco although such an invitation to a working geophysicist is believed unprecedented.

Several attempts were made to schedule a meeting at the U.N. headquarters before the many demanding schedules converged and on 29 December Gochioco went to New York City, USA, to meet key UNDP staff and was briefed on the current status of UNICAND projects in China and the Philippines, the two countries selected to test a revised



Jean Chu and Lawrence M. Gochioco at the UN during their 29 December meeting to discuss a natural disaster mitigation program.

concept.

Obviously, the devastating tsunami of 26 December, that resulted from the 9.0-magnitude earthquake in the Indian Ocean basin, meant that some key senior UNDP officers were unable to attend the meeting. However, Gochioco was extended an open invitation to return to the U.N. for further discussions—likely to be soon because, due to the tragedy in South Asia, UNDP has been directed to accelerate its efforts.

“Having the UN contact an SEG member on such a timely and critical issue is a huge compliment to our profession,” Gochioco said. “It is also encouraging to see that official agencies are realizing that applied geophysics has developed the expertise and technology to play a role in public safety and to play that role almost immediately. I feel strongly that our profession has the tools to help local communities develop and implement some early warning systems, particularly in the third world where communications are less than state-of-the-art, when severe natural disasters suddenly threaten.”

This obviously is just the first chapter in a story which, should the necessary follow-up occur on both sides, has considerable potential for the proverbial happy ending. **TLE**