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Profiles

JESSICA FAIETA was one of former United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan's right-hands. Hailing from Ecuador, Faieta has carried out U.N. missions in five countries and is now the U.N.'s representative in El Salvador.

U.N. Placed Its Trust in Faieta

Photo caption: "I've never been able to say no. I've always been willing to take on numerous responsibilities that can be big –sometimes too big– challenges, but I haven't restrained myself."

Source: U.N.

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Kofi Annan, former United Nations (U.N.) Secretary-General, had many right-hand staff members during his two administrations. One of them, on floor 38, was Jessica Faieta, the highest-climbing Ecuadorian within the United Nations (UN) system.

In her office adjoining Annan's, Faieta was head of powerful Deputy Secretary-General Mark Malloch Brown's cabinet. Before landing in the world's oval office where issues from hunger to wars are faced down, Faieta had already carried out missions in five countries, including Cuba, Panama, and Argentina.

In Cuba, she tackled the ever-present conflicts with the U.S. as well as hurricanes. In Panama, her name tops the list of most prominent people working to hand the canal over to Panamanian authorities. In Argentina, she confronted a more modern-day crisis: the country's 2001 financial breakdown and President Fernando de la Rúa's hasty departure from office.

Faieta then switched to U.N.'s central offices in New York where, in 2003, she aided in finding a way out of the Iraq conflict. "Those were intense, tough years, but it was a privilege and learning experience," Faieta reminisces in her present-day office in San Salvador.

Now the general U.N. representative for El Salvador and Belize, she barely had time in August to seek aid for Hurricane Dean victims. In Belize, she set up her emergency tent and reaped positive spirits: "The damage was only material, we didn't lose a single life. But in such a small country strapped for resources, the economic impact and set-back has been significant."

According to the Ecuadorian ambassador in Washington, Luis Gallegos, the U.N. office in El Salvador is extremely important as it works to promote development and bring the country together following the long, war-stricken years. "Jessica is the ideal person for the mission since she understands the social and political processes and knows

how the U.N. works toward reaching peace.” The ambassador also comments that she is a “brilliant professional, highly regarded among her colleagues and was always ready to bring forward issues related to Ecuador.”

Accustomed to extreme situations, Faieta has taken part in historic events like the Baghdad bombing, which killed 32 of her colleagues. She has also worked toward completing the goals set out in the Millennium Development Goals. In all these cases, Faieta has relied upon first-hand information and come up with solid proposals.

During the transition between Annan and the new Secretary General, Ban Ki-moon, she served as part of the task force that led the change in administration, at the request of Annan and Ki-moon.

Living at the heart of the U.N., however, has not left her much time for her personal life or her family. She still visits her family in Quito once or twice a year, commenting “I haven’t lost touch with my country. I am very much an Ecuadorian and am aware of what happens there. I stay up-to-date about current events through the news and my parents.”

Her parents instilled this philosophy within her as they also encouraged her to learn different languages and financed her first Masters degree. Faieta speaks Spanish, English, Italian, French, as well as understands Portuguese and a little bit of Russian. Given this background, she clearly has the resources to be a leader and it comes as no surprise that U.S.-based Yale University’s World Fellows Program included her in the list of 18 promises of 2006 to share her own experiences while learning about others.

During the semester at Yale, she debated and worked with Gatachew Alemu, director of Ethiopia’s Intellectual Property Office; Xenefon Avlonitis, head of the commission controlling the Greek market and currency; Saleh Barakat, director of the Agail Art Gallery in Beirut; and journalists and business leaders.

“Jessica is the type of person with the academic and professional profile that we aim to bring to Yale. She was one of our choices because of her excellent leadership capacity,” comments Joao Aleixo, associate director of the Yale Office of International Affairs. Aleixo hopes that other successful Ecuadorians can be part of this annual intensive program for world leaders. They can be from the public or private sector, from NGOs, the worlds of art, literature, journalism, or the academia, among others.

Her name seems destined to be in the world’s fast-lane –and she is not complaining. She is used it and, moreover, likes what she does; her sixteen years at the U.N. attest to that. The World Fellows Program is an opportunity to return to the academic world. “The program gave us the chance to take a refresher course, catch up on contemporary thinking, and share experiences. That’s what drew me to it.”

Faieta is one of the privileged students who shared experiences with contemporary-thinking professors like Paul Kennedy and Charles Hill, as well as attend Yale-sponsored talks with former Mexican President Ernesto Zedillo. This academic experience allowed Faieta to “come closer to people, making the U.N.’s work feel more real.”

Now, in El Salvador, Faieta is working to bring together a country that, 15 years after the war, is still divided and highly unequal. But she knows that her career at the U.N. has been an endless string of risks.

“I’ve never been able to say no. I’ve always been willing to take on numerous responsibilities that can be big –sometimes too big– challenges, but I haven’t restrained

myself and I've always been able to find someone who would support me and open doors for me.”

Center callout: THE U.N. ECONOMIST WHO HELPS THE WORLD

- She holds an MBA as well as a Masters in International Relations from Columbia University.
- In Italy, she took postgraduate studies in Economic Development, sponsored by the Italian government.