

MY IMPRESSIONS OF WORLD CONGRESS AT OUAGADOUGOU

Fr. Varghese Paul, SJ

“Where on earth is Burkina Faso?” I confronted the question from my friends in India when I told them that I am going to Burkina Faso to participate in the World Congress of the International Catholic Union of the Press (UCIP).

Two years back UCIP World Assembly at Rome (9 to 13 December 2008) announced the holding World Congress at Ouagadougou, the capital city of Burkina Faso, a country in North-West Africa. As an active participant in the Assembly I favoured Burkina Faso an African country and I reported the news in South Asian Religious News (SAR News) and many Church newspapers in South Asia and beyond carried the news.

Burkina Faso is a small landlocked country surrounded by Ivory Coast, Ghana, Togo and Benin in South and Niger in the East and Mali in the West. Someone during the conference raised a question: What is Burkina Faso and rightly answered himself that Burkina Faso is her people. Truly the strength and wealth of the country are the people.

I experienced them as a hospitable and loving people. As soon as I set my foot on the land I felt the warmth of friendship and the care of the people for their visitors. When I climbed down the ladder from the plane the President of L’Union Catholique Africaine de la Presse (UCAP-Burkina Faso) and of UCAP Africa, Mr. Alexandre Le Grand Rouamba was there with open arms to welcome me with a warm embrace and drive me to VIP launch. Alexandre and other Burkina Faso friends proved unambiguously what we say in India “Atithi Devo Bhavah” meaning “guests are treated as gods”.

Of course, I knew Alexandre as a friend for many years through our meetings and other UCIP events in Africa, Europe and Canada. But I was happy to know all delegates to the World Congress were similarly welcomed and warmly treated by our hosts in Burkina Faso during the Congress.

A total of 455 participants from 48 countries representing all 5 continents attended the Congress. Many speakers chosen from around the world presented interesting papers. As expected most speakers were from Burkina Faso and other countries of Africa. There were lively discussions in the Congress on various papers presented around the theme “Media at the Service of Justice, Peace and Good Governance in a World of Inequalities and Poverty”.

The local organizers of the Congress headed by Rouamba Alexandre Le Grand, President of the National Committee of the Organization left no stone unturned to make the World Congress a great success. Declaring the Congress open the President of Burkina Faso, Mr. Blaise Compaore expressed his happiness that it is an honour for the people of Burkina Faso to welcome the journalists of the 23rd World Congress of UCIP. The UCIP Congress has come first time to Africa in its 82-year old history, he said.

Expressing his delight that Burkina Faso is the first African country to host the UCIP International Meeting, the President of National Organizing Committee, Rouamba Alexandre Le

Grand welcomed the Congress participants. He paid homage to the pioneers of the UCIP Burkina & of Africa, who paved way for Burkina Faso to be the first African country to host the UCIP World Congress.

The delight of the Burkina people in hosting the World Congress has shown through the large presence of both civil and ecclesiastical leaders and dignitaries as well as journalists from the local media. The Holy Father Pope Benedict XVI was represented by Bishop Claudio Maria Celli. There were at least 9 bishops and Archbishops of Burkina Faso in the opening ceremony of the Congress on September 14th and many of them also attended the closing function of the Congress on the 18th evening.

The local newspapers and other media gave wide coverage to the Congress. The daily “Le Pays” in its front page story described the UCIP Congress at Burkina Faso as “Justice done for Africa”. Another daily “L’Observateur Paalga” described the 23rd UCIP Congress as “first time in Africa” in its 82 years history.

Most participants expressed their happiness and satisfaction describing the historical event as “a great Congress at Burkina Faso” and “a unique international meeting”. The 23rd UCIP World Congress was great and unique in many respects. Usually the Congress gets large number of participants from the continent where it is held. The Congress at Burkina Faso saw vast majority of the participants from different countries of Africa.

The Burkina Faso Congress was unique that the Government and civic authorities fully collaborated with the local Catholic organizers not only making available Ouaga 2000 Conference Hall and vehicles for the transportation of Congress participants but also actively participating in the World Congress.

The interest of the whole Africa in the Congress was also seen that the former President of Ghana, Mr. Jerry John Rawlings participated in the Congress presenting a very interesting and thought-provoking paper on “How to Work out for the Setting up of Good Governance in our Societies”.

From India I was invited to present a paper on the topic “Inter-Religious Conflicts and Challenges for Peace”. My paper with 72 slides in power-point presentation was well received and much appreciated. The Moderator of the Session Bishop Benjamin N’Diaye of Senegal later told me that he wanted to stop me when the assigned time was getting over but he did not do it as he found my conference very interesting. Some people appreciated my talk because my language was simple. Some others told me they could follow me well because they could read the whole text in the power-point presentation.

A highlight of the Congress was the UCIP Award functions cum dinner held in SIAO Hotel on Sept. 16. L’Observateur Paalga (The New Observer) of Ouagadougou got UCIP Gold Medal for championing press freedom and being the voice of people in the best way possible. Titus Brandsama Award was bestowed on a Venezuelan journalist and Professor, Mr. Andres Canizalez. Most UCIP Awards were bestowed on young journalists for their outstanding

performance like Mr. Mathew T. George of “News Week” weekly received an award for Excellence in Journalism.

Three seniors in UCIP – Fr. Varghese Paul, SJ, India, Mrs. Joyce Kazembe of Zimbabwe and Dr. Ismar de Oliveira Soares of Brazil received certificates declaring them as UCIP Members of Honour “for active presence in UCIP for several decades and for continuous and inspiring initiatives for the well being of journalist and other media professionals world wide...”.

Another high point of the Congress was the outing of Congress participants on September 17 from early morning. On the day we witnessed a cultural ceremony of “False Departure of Mogha-Naba Baongho” followed by an interview with his majesty, the Emperor of Mosse. It was a blend of tradition and modernity of Burkina Faso. Interest in the ceremony and in the meeting with the Emperor Mugho Naba Baongho was raised because the Emperor was a sponsor of the Congress and the Prime Minister of Mosse, Me Frederic Titinga Pacero had addressed the Congress on “Unwritten and Unspoken Speech in Burkina Faso: Factor of Unity and Peace” in a very traditional style.

The second sponsor of the Congress was Mrs. Beatrice Damiba of Burkina Faso. She gave an inspiring and enlightening address on the topic “Professionalisms and Culture of Peace”.

The Congress came to an end with a closing ceremony in the Conference Hall Ouaga 2000 with a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment. The Secretary General Joseph Chittilappilly thanked the President of Burkina Faso Mr. Blaise Compaore and many others for their support and cooperation for making Congress a great success. “This has been one of the best Congresses of UCIP. We have attained our goals and objectives. This Congress will serve as a model for other countries in the future”, said the Secretary General.

In the concluding ceremony a sponsor who attended some session of in the Congress Mrs. Beatrice Damiba also congratulated the Congress participants for their great works and great accomplishments in the Congress.

Three cheers to the people of Burkina Faso and of Africa. (contact the author: ciss@satyam.net.in)

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