

AFRICAN DRUMS ARE BEATING  
Fr Varghese Paul, SJ

When I landed at Accra on June 17 late evening my host drove me from the airport straight to a restaurant in the city for dinner. I flew to Ghana to attend twin programmes of the World Assembly of the International Catholic Union of the Press (UCIP) and Pan African Refresher Programme. Talking with my host Dr Godfried Kwesi Annoh in the restaurant I realized that the hot news in the capital city was the 100% cancellation of international debts of Ghana and some 17 other countries including 14 in Africa.

The G8 Finance Ministers cancelled on June 12, 2005 with immediate effect the debts to the tune of US \$ 40 billion owned by 18 poor countries to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank and the African Development Bank. African nations generally welcomed the international debt cancellation.

During the Refresher Programme I learnt more about the international debt of African countries. The Pan African Refresher Programme had an all embracing theme: “Journalism in Africa: Achievements, Challenges and Scopes - Enhancing the Impact of Communication and Information for Sustainable Development.

More than one speaker referred to the international debts of African countries and explained how they are impoverishing the African nations. Some African countries after paying the interest on debts have nothing much left in their coffers to spend on important fields like health, education, infrastructure and communication.

A Ghanaian journalist mentioned that the cancellation of US \$ 40 billion is not a big deal for the cancelling agencies. The debts cancelled European Union’s (EU) subsidy of 40 days as the EU farmers are subsidized \$ 1 billion a day!

Then, some of the debt was embezzled by despotic rulers to enrich themselves and not for the benefit of their country. At least in one case, the despotic ruler did not even stay in his country! The question at least in some cases is whether the lending agencies needed more to lend than the debtors needed to borrow.

There are cases as mentioned by a Nigerian journalist, Fr Chris Bologo that indebted African countries have paid much more to their debtors by way of interest than their debts. For instance, Nigeria borrowed \$ 17 billion from international monetary agencies and the country has paid \$ 25 billion in debt servicing and still their debts stand and Nigeria is not considered eligible for debt-relief in the present reckoning. And Nigeria has a 140 million population and over 70 per cent of its population live in abject poverty.

My African journalist-colleagues argued that Africa is poor today mainly because of trade barriers. For instance, when the cocoa prize was attractive, an African country cultivated cocoa in the whole country; but by harvesting time the cocoa price was reduced to half by the rich countries importing cocoa! African products are kept away from the markets of rich countries by huge subsidies to their own farmers, disproportioned tariffs and other trade barriers. Remove their trade barriers. Invest in Africa’s capacity to trade. Then the continent will trade their way to

prosperity in the place of the present poverty and dependency on rich nations for their aid, said an African journalist from Ghana.

From a few speeches in the official opening function of the UCIP World Assembly and the Pan African Refresher Programme I concluded that the print media is powerful in Ghana. The President of Catholic Association of Media Practitioners, Ghana (CAMPG) Dr Godfried Kwesi Annoh told us that Catholic journalists in Ghana are prominent wherever they go.

Most of the speakers in the Pan African Refresher Programme were delegates themselves from some 18 African countries. They spoke eloquently about one or other aspect of the theme with regards to the situation of their own country or region.

There were also some eminent specialists in the media who were specially invited to address us. One of them was Dr A Bomah Koomson of the School of Communication Studies, University of Ghana, Legon, Accra. He spoke to us on the topic: “The African Journalists and the Promotion of Economic Growth and Political Stability on the Continent of Africa.”

Quoting extensively Ghana Constitution Dr Koomson showed that the Ghanaian 1992 constitution unambiguously speaks about the role of journalists in the economic and political growth of the country. “By constitutional injunction journalists are obligated as a solemn duty to be the ears and eyes of goings-on within public bodies and authorities,” said Dr Koomson.

The Article 35(8) of Ghanaian Constitution says, “the State shall take steps to eradicate corrupt practices and the abuse of power.” Commenting on the article Dr Koomson said that one way for journalists to use his or her power is to act as a watch-dog by evaluating and monitoring the performance of those holding political and civil jobs and exposing corruption wherever they are found.

Dr Koomson gave several examples of the vigorous media exposing corruption and misuse of power through investigative reports. “A series of investigative reports by the “Ghanaian Chronicle” led to a Deputy Minister of State Mr Alhaji Moctar Bamba losing his job,” he said.

Another eminent speaker who impressed me deeply was the Professor of Politic and International Relations at the Legon Centre for International Affairs, Dr Gilbert Keith Bluwey. The Professor spoke on the topic “Journalism in Africa: The Role of Journalists in Promoting Good Governance in Africa.”

Dr Bluwey said that the term ‘good governance’ is “a system of rule through representative institutions which ensure transparency, accountability, fair allocation of resources and just apportionment of punishment and reward. It also includes respect for individuals – for human rights.”

After elucidating each aspect of good governance Dr Bluwey called the journalists to be persons of knowledge through constant research and learning. For, he quoted a Latin proverb, ‘nemo dat quo non habet’ (“You cannot give what you do not have.”) “It is your duty to provoke critical thinking on public policy: to promote popular control over public decision-making and to ensure popular direction of official action,” he said.

Dr Bluwey concluded saying “that the journalist, everywhere, is a front-line defender of human rights and a promoter of good governance.”

Another interesting speaker was the Chief Editor of the largest newspaper in Accra, ‘Daily Graphic’, Mr Yaw Boadu-Ayeboatoh. He addressed the delegates on the topic of “Journalism in Africa: Threats to Freedom of Expression – A Ghanaian Experience.”

Ghanaian constitution gives full freedom to journalists. So the Editor Mr Boadu-Ayeboatoh argued that freedom is best exercised when it is self-disciplined and self-restrained.

Mr Boadu-Ayeboatoh has quoted Mahatma Gandhi to prove his point that “the sole aim of journalism should be service. The press is a great power but just as an unchained torrent submerges the whole countryside and devastates crops, even so an uncontrolled pen serves to destroy. If the control is from without, it proves more poisonous than want of control. It can be profitable only when exercised from within.”

Still another eminent speaker was the Lecturer of the School of Communication, University of Ghana, Dr Audrey Gadzekpo. She acknowledged that “throughout Africa’s turbulent political history, the media have played contradictory roles. They have been at the forefront of political struggles for liberation from colonial rule and challenged oppressive rule thereafter. At the same time, the media have also acted as a tool of oppressive African regimes.”

Dr Gadzekpo regretted that in many African countries the access to public information is extremely poor. Even in countries like Ghana where the press is free with constitutional provisions, the responses to requests for public information were appalling with only 9.2 per cent responses.

Dr Gadzekpo recalled that a conference on ‘The State of Media in West Africa’ held at Accra in March 1996 called the journalists “to be guided by the ethics of the profession and strive for truth always.”

With such rich, scholarly but down-to-earth inputs the delegates were extremely happy and satisfied with the Pan African Refresher Programme.

“The Refresher Programme was a very enriching experience for me. The papers and discussions were very enlightening. I learnt much from the programme. Living and exchanging with so many delegates from 26 countries and of many more cultures, languages and tribes were unforgettable experiences for me and I am now able to do better in my journalistic works,” said Sr Grace I Ushie, a delegate from Logos, Nigeria.

I came back from the UCIP World Assembly and the Pan African Refresher Programme with the realization that the African drums are beating. There is a real awakening of the African people to the concrete realities of the continent like corruption, mis-governance, exploitation of Africa by the powerful and the rich people both within and outside the continent. The African journalists are determined to rise to their challenges and create a peaceful and prosperous Africa.

