

‘AKWAABA’, WELCOME TO GHANA
Fr Varghese Paul, SJ

‘Akwaaba’ is the first word, which I heard as my host Dr. Godfried Kwesi Annoh greeted me at the International Kotaka Airport, Accra on June 17, 2005. “Akwaaba, welcome to Ghana,” said Dr Annoh as he gave me a warm embrace.

A little earlier standing in the queue of emigration check, a police officer called me out of the queue and asked me to follow him. My mind raised with a question: am I a privileged person for marking my visa application as “Journalist” as my profession or am I to be subjected to special scrutiny for my same profession?

The Emigration Chief Officer, a lady speedily scrutinized my passport and stamped my entry into Ghana. ‘Madam, why is this special privilege granted to me that I am called out of the queue of the emigration check and you have speedily processed my documents?’

“Well, we do not want old people to suffer standing in the queue long,” said the Chief Emigration Officer with a welcome smile.

“Thank you, Madam, for respecting my gray hairs!” I said to the Lady Officer with much gratitude in my heart. For, I have been on the way for 36 hours instead of the scheduled 22 hours! Instead of just an hour-long stop-over at Lagos Murtala Muhammed Airport at Lagos, the capital of Nigeria I was stranded for 13 hours at the airport. Our Ethiopian plane had developed technical problems with its electronic equipment on landing at Lagos.

Those of us travelling onward to Accra were told first to remain inside the plane as the technical problem would be sorted out in 45 minutes. As we remained the light and the music went off and I realized that the internal electric circuit of the plane had failed. After an hour and half inside the plane, we were told that we could go to the airport lounge as the plane may take one more hour to get ready.

After an hour the Ethiopian hosts brought us cold drinks and biscuits and we were told that the mechanics were working and the plane would be ready in another hour. We could see through the open cockpit window that one or two persons were working inside the huge Boeing 767 plane just sitting close to our lounge.

While waiting hour by hour for the technicians to get the plane ready for take off, the temperature of some the passengers was rising and they were shouting at the airline representatives and saying all sorts of things about the Ethiopian airlines and the country. To calm the situation our hosts took us to the airport restaurant and told the manager to serve any one item in their menu according to the choice of the passengers. As there was only one waitress to take orders and serve the food, it took more than two hours to serve the 52 passengers and a few other customers.

Even after lunch there was no sign of the plane getting ready to take off. When some passengers protested and wanted to complain to the airport manger, the Ethiopian officials told us that there

were Lufthansa and another airline flying to Accra late that evening and they would try to accommodate us in them.

One Ethiopian lady passenger took objections to another lady passenger for speaking ill of the Ethiopian people and Ethiopian airline. "I know about so many evils of your country and people. But I am not speaking about them in public", she argued. Fortunately they stopped short of coming to blows.

To cut a long story short, at 7.30 PM the Ethiopian airline served dinner everybody with rice, chicken and a cool drink in the airport restaurant. The only other Indian among the passengers, Mr Joshi, a pharmaceutical consultant from New Delhi did not want to eat the chicken in his plate. So he put the chicken piece into my plate and I was happy to serve him with more than half of the rice from my plate.

We were then asked to hurry up with the meal and then each one of us was called and given a new boarding pass. The Ethiopian airline managed to charter a small propeller plane of Blueway Company for us. The big Boeing Jet 767 flew about 30,000 feet high, but the propeller plane was flying close to the earth and I could see dark clouds above and below lights which looked like stars in the darkness of night.

Inside the small plane we were given snack packets and fruit-juice. But I was in no mood to eat anything and so I put the packed snack into my handbag. Then I remember the only one host giving us instructions on how to react in case of any emergency. But I dozed off and slept sitting upright in the stiff chair. When I woke up the plane was landing at Kotoka Airport at Accra.

After the emigration check I was worried if my host would be there to receive me. So I brought a phone-card and called the local Programme Coordinator Mr Benedict (Ben) Assorow. He assured me that his man was at the airport and he would find me soon. A young man greeted me affably. I thought that he was Ben's man sent to pick me up. But he asked which hotel I wanted to go. He turned out to be a taxi driver!

Meanwhile Ben's man after searching for me in the emigration clearance section came to the meeting area of passengers by their people. He recognized me and greeted: "Akwaaba – welcome Fr Varghese Paul to Ghana". Then he introduced himself as Godfried Kwasi Annoh. Then, I remembered meeting him at UCIP World Congress at Bangkok in October 2004. Later I came to know that he was the President of Catholic Association of Media Practitioners, Ghana (CAMP-G).

Godfried took me in a big car, Land Cruiser, with the driver Mr Adamu driving us straight to a restaurant not too far from the airport in Accra city. There I met the Programme Coordinator Ben Assorow and Mrs. Rebecca Adda-Dontoh in the restaurant. After warmly greeting each other in Ghanaian style Ben told me that he was at the Accra Airport in the morning to receive me.

Then Ben told his team members: "Give Fr Paul a good dinner and you two have good meals with him." Ben and Rebecca then left for the airport to pick up the UCIP Secretary General Mr Joseph Chittilappilly. In the restaurant I told Dr Godfried that I had dinner already at Lagos an

hour ago, so I would take just a cup of soup. But you two have a good meal; it is your dinner time.” But they too ordered only soup with me!

After the meal they drove me to the Guest House of the Ghana Institute of Management and Public Administration (GIMPA), at Greenhill, Achimota a few kilometers away from Accra City but close to Accra University at Legon. Godfried had with him the key to the room assigned to me. I was exhausted and sleepy. So just took a shower bath and went to sleep at 11.45 PM local time. But on my watch it was 4.45 AM. I had traveled two nights without proper sleep!

When I got up the next morning at 8.45 AM the birds had nearly finished their morning hymns. I got ready fast and saw what a luxurious room I had with a big table, wall to wall carpet, bit cupboard with safety locker, TV, a fridge and even a sofa set! Thinking that it is too late to go for breakfast anywhere I took the airline snack and mineral water in the room for my breakfast. Then, Ben came to take me for breakfast together with the UCIP President Mr Ismar de Oliveira Soares and Mr Joseph Chittilappilly. We had a long breakfast in the GIMPA canteen.