

Commonwealth Week Celebrations in Ghana

Commonwealth Day has been organised and celebrated in Ghana by representative High Commissions, Commonwealth Organisations and Ghanaian citizens alike for many years. The strong ties that Ghana holds with Commonwealth Nations that are apparent year round made exemplary efforts to commemorate the day and explore it's meaning to the citizens of Ghana.

This year, the Australian, British, Canadian, Indian, Nigerian and South African Commissions with the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative, the British Council, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ghana Education Service met several times and decided on a series of events lasting a week to celebrate the day and promote the Commonwealth in 2005. The events were designed to be interactive, informative and inquisitive. In light of the theme "Education: Creating Opportunity, Realising Potential", which the Commonwealth stakeholders took to heart, it was decided that the main part of the launch would be presented by Ghanaian students. The relationships that have been formed between Ghana and Commonwealth countries were extended to students in Ghana enabling them to express their views, ask their questions and display their expressions of the Commonwealth.

The celebrations in Ghana were kicked off by an energetic launch at the British Council in Accra on March 15th. The event was attended by the Minister for Education and the Minister for Foreign Affairs and High Commissioners of the Australian, British, Canadian, Indian and Nigerian Missions in Ghana.

Nana Oye Lithur, of the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative, welcomed the invited guests and introduced the significance of the Day, Ghana's place in it and rights to education. "What has kept us together" she said "are our common bonds and historical links. Today's Commonwealth is very young. Unemployment rates range between 30 and 50% and over 75 million children lack access to primary school. Young people in the Commonwealth are faced with similar challenges".

The Minister of Foreign Affairs, who officially hosted the event, extended the well wishes of the President to the dignitaries and audience. Noting the "crucial role that education plays in building strong communities, generating growth and creating opportunities", the president called for all Ghanaians to "rededicate ourselves to the association and to the values and goals it represents".

The Indian High Commissioner, the Hon. Khai Framji, being the most senior Mission in Ghana, represented the other High Commissions and put Ghana's role and the education theme into perspective. "Ghana was the first country in Africa to join the Commonwealth" he stated. "The Commonwealth became the natural association of choice for many new nations that had freed themselves from the shackles of colonisation in the 1950s, 60s and 70s. Commonwealth countries now work together to make their economies and democratic systems stronger and agree on issues of wider international concern, be they education, democracy, human rights, fair trade or combating terrorism". Focusing on the conclusions of the Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers in Edinburgh, 2003, he encouraged Ministers, international and civil society organisations to work together to deliver "greater opportunities and better life chances to those in the Commonwealth who need it the most".

In light of the theme this year the organisers of the event decided to unite students in Accra to perform for the event. Each school was represented by six students who balloted for a Commonwealth country represented in Ghana. They were directed to the corresponding High Commission where they were given the opportunity to ask questions about the countries they were to present. The presentations had no guidelines other than length and balanced of gender representation to ensure the students could use their full range of creative abilities. The presentations were varied and entertaining for the dignitaries and 300 or so, guests and students who came to the event. Australia was portrayed through a harmonised rendition of their anthem and reciting of poetry, South Africa was presented by a dramatic skit about Apartheid, Canada's environmental assets and bi-lingual identity were expressed in speech and song while the UK was represented in a dramatised UN meeting on aid which was attended by a surprise drop in by the "Queen". The presentations upheld the theme of this year's Commonwealth Day and the students expressed the assets and focuses of the Commonwealth as a whole; creativity, diversity, human rights, diplomacy and artistic expression. The event was broadcasted as headline news on three of Ghana's four national networks.

On March 15, Joy FM's morning show in Accra hosted a programme with Mr. Kuleke, the director of International Organisations and Conferences of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs with Jon Richardson, the High Commissioner for Australia. Mr. Richardson also served as Counsellor at the Australian High Commission in London where he was responsible for Commonwealth Affairs. The discussion focussed on the relevance of the Commonwealth in the 21st century and its impact in South Africa during Apartheid.

High Commissioners Donald Bobiash, of Canada, Gordon Wetherell of UK and Joseph Olatunji Kolapo of Nigeria had a discussion on the TV3 morning show on March 16th. The discussion covered several issues relating to the benefits of the Commonwealth, especially in the developing world. Mr. Gordon Wetherell focused on the issue of brain drain, a significant challenge to Ghana's development, asserting the policy in Britain of not recruiting international students and citing the far reaching benefits that the UK Universities have provided to many Commonwealth scholars. Mr. Bobiash followed this discussion with an explanation of distance learning one of the sub themes of this year's Commonwealth Day. He asserted that not only did Ghana benefit from distance learning through their students in rural places within the country, but that Ghana has a mutual exchange of students and workers from Canada, the UK as well as the rest of Africa with mutually beneficial opportunities created. Additionally, North American students who were able to study in Ghana were able to better realise the challenges of development on the ground and bring that understanding back with them.

Mr. Bobiash also discussed the importance of the international community that the Commonwealth provided which facilitated south-south investment that may not otherwise be channelled. Additionally, the smaller-scale, comprehensive relations between Commonwealth countries and their shared values allowed the "quiet diplomacy" to effectively cope with complicated and tough issues. Dr. Kolapo was able to promote the benefits of the Commonwealth from the perspective of a developing country, he stated that his country felt the losses of being excluded from the Commonwealth during the mid-1990s and that Nigeria did benefit from it's

inclusion in the Commonwealth. These benefits are concrete, stated the three High Commissioners, and their benefits are seen by other nations. They cited Mozambique, a former Portuguese colony that had recently joined the Commonwealth, having been surrounded by other Commonwealth nations. One of South Africa's first international priorities, after replacing the Apartheid with a democratic government was to join the Commonwealth of Nations that supported them in their fight against Apartheid.

This programme was followed by a discussion with Sam Okudzeto, the Chair of the International Advisory Commission of the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative, on the economic relations between Commonwealth countries. The focus of the discussion turned to the opportunities and links that have been made within south-south relationships formed within the Commonwealth. For example the television station in Accra that aired the very programme where he was discussing these issues in Ghana was a Malaysian investment. He compared these positive developments to the links that have not been made. The example Mr. Okudzeto emphasised was the potential for trade between Nigeria and Ghana that is readily available but that neither nation has yet taken the small steps to facilitate.

Prayers were made throughout the Muslim and Christian places of worship on their holy days preceding Commonwealth Day.

In the Parliamentary world, the Chairman of the Committee of Foreign Affairs, the Hon. Kwabena Okerchiri Adusa made statements on the floor on March 14th, commenting on the role of education. He stated that early education was a safety valve for a "non exploitative and non violent society and enhances competitiveness in

a knowledge based national and global economy”. He also noted the importance of tertiary education especially for women in Ghana who are under represented in the Universities and Polytechnics.

To extend the reach of Commonwealth Day in Ghana, the Commonwealth Society of Ghana organised a debate, in which four secondary schools participated in Kumasi on Saturday March 12th. Students from Prempeh Secondary School, Opoku Ware Secondary School, Yaa Asantewaa Secondary School and St. Louis Secondary School explored the topics of: Democratic Reform vs. Socio Economic Development, followed by a debated on whether the Queen be the Head of the Commonwealth, each school taking a side of the debate. The students were well informed, researched their topics well, and were supported by more than 200 of their classmates. The final winner was determined by a quiz, the winners were Kofi Amoani Debrah and William Kofi Demitia from Prempeh College. The awards ceremony held on Monday March 14th, Commonwealth Day, included a keynote delivered by Prof. Kwesi Andah, the Vice Chancellor of the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology. Six media houses, including GTV, who aired the event on March 19th, were present to cover the event.

As was done for the launch in Accra last year, a quiz for students took place in the Western Region at Asankragwaa Secondary Technical School.

Commonwealth Day celebrations and activities were reported widely and frequently in the Ghanaian Newspapers, in addition to the radio and national television stations. The group of organisations, Missions and Ministries that organised

the events for the week used their media ties to encourage stories on the Commonwealth and on education. Through the publications of several media houses, the events for the week were announced and the Queen's, as well as the Ghanaian President's, speech for Commonwealth Day were published for the public on March 15th in the Daily Graphic. Additionally, a press release on the premium the Queen placed on education by the BBC was published the following day. The Launch received coverage as did a previous interview with the Australian High Commissioner, Jon Richardson. Notably, the former Australian High Commissioner to Ghana, Mr. Matthew Neuhaus, the current Director of Political affairs of the Commonwealth Secretariat, was cited in print on the 16th when he lauded Ghana for playing a leading role in promoting the values of the Commonwealth within the African continent. His speech "The Commonwealth in the International Jigsaw" from the Commonwealth Press Union Conference in Sydney was also published in full on the 17th. On the same day, the Canadian organisation, Journalists for Human Rights, published a piece on rights to education in Ghana. A feature article is due in the Daily Graphic at the beginning of the week.

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