

TERRAVIVA

THE INDEPENDENT NEWSPAPER OF THE COMMONWEALTH PEOPLE'S FORUM - ABUJA NIGERIA, DECEMBER 1 - 7, 2003

Come To Us, People Tell Leaders

By Ferial Haffajee

CIVIL SOCIETY leaders and representatives have sent an urgent request to heads of government to meet with them Thursday ahead of the official opening of the Commonwealth Heads of Government (CHOGM) meeting.

In a letter signed and delivered at lunch yesterday, 12 civil society leaders who represent a critical mass of peoples' movements across the Commonwealth laid a thinly veiled charge of double standards when they pointed to the fact that the heads of government would meet the Commonwealth Business Council in a forum.

"We find it bizarre that such a privilege is extended to the business community but not to civil society," said Martin Sime of the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisation.

Civil society leaders ask for a meeting with heads of government

Sources say that the Nigerian government is keen for the dialogue, but that other Commonwealth heads of state are hesitant about the meeting. The civil society advisory committee says such a meeting is consistent with the Commonwealth's plans to refashion itself for the 21st century. The Coolum Declaration, quoted in the letter, says: "We are convinced of the need for stronger links and better two-way

communication and co-ordination between the official and non-governmental Commonwealth, and among Commonwealth NGOs".

The civil society advisory committee wants a two-hour meeting on Thursday with a selected group of six heads of state and a limited number of civil society representatives to discuss poverty eradication, world trade, and partnerships between government and civil society. They want the Commonwealth Foundation chair Graca Machel to lead the meeting.

Pointing out that the Commonwealth always called civil groups "partners", Simes said: "We don't feel like partners at the moment." Since the last CHOGM meeting two years ago, civil society has become more organised and grown exponentially, says Simes, adding that the sector is increasing taking responsibility for service delivery.

But since the Coolum meeting, little had been done to make concrete the pledges and commitments on partnership.

"At present it [the Commonwealth] lags behind other international institutions such as the United Nations and the Bretton Woods institutions, which have instituted direct links with civil society organisations," says the letter. It adds that, "While Commonwealth meetings are valued as places where countries meet on more equal terms than in other international fora, at the same time civil society has less opportunity to engage than in other for a."



People and the Commonwealth: so near and often so far

The heads of government are meeting, business leaders are meeting. That people are meeting at their own forum is not last, and not least. If people come first, so must this forum. Sadly that is not the way some see it. Political leaders are meeting business leaders, but not people speaking for people. Many are now asking, Why Not? People must be a part of political and business meetings, and not apart from them.

'Time to End Timidity'

"TOO DECENT, too tame, too timid" that is civil society in the Commonwealth, according to Dr. Mo Arigbede of the Coalition for Popular Development Initiatives in Nigeria (COPODIN).

Speaking during the first day of the Commonwealth Civil Society meeting on Development and Democracy, Arigbede said all the country reports presented on 'maximizing civil

society's contribution to democracy and development' had dwelt on a series of crises of self-definition, and identity. This caused them to be lukewarm in their reaction to government excesses and abrogation's of rights and freedoms.

"When world leaders are waging relentless wars in the name of anti terrorism, while others deny their citizens basic rights civil society has remained stoic."

Arigbede said trade unions were being 'slaughtered', people did not have a hand in the way they were being governed and yet there were no civil society groups protesting on the streets. "We are afraid to take a position that would make us an enemy of government and yet we do not exist to be the friends of government. Civil society is too tame, timid, too decent."

Foundation Strengthens the Commonwealth

Colin Ball

Director,

Commonwealth Foundation

WHAT IS the Commonwealth Foundation? What does it do? Why is it important?

It is the inter-governmental organisation of the Commonwealth that is charged to serve what is now popularly called the 'people's' or 'unofficial' Commonwealth, or 'Commonwealth Civil Society'.

The Foundation was established by Commonwealth Heads of Government in 1965, at the same time that the Commonwealth Secretariat was set up to be the Commonwealth's 'civil

service' to serve and link the governments of the Commonwealth.

Since then, both agencies have been based in Marlborough House in London. And, like the Secretariat, the Foundation is funded by Commonwealth governments.

Each member government makes an assessed contribution to the Foundation's resource base each year, generating about £2.5 million pounds. In recent

years we have been successful in raising additional funds through additional

voluntary contributions to our resource base from private grant-making

Foundations such as the Ford Foundation, and from member governments, including those of the UK, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and Nigeria (this latter in respect of the 2003 Commonwealth People's Forum). The voluntary contributions are always in respect of particular, designated Foundation programmes or activities.

From the outset the Foundation has been governed by a Board of Governors comprised of

representatives of member governments, who are most commonly their High Commissioners in London. The Board is chaired by a distinguished Commonwealth citizen, nominated and elected by Commonwealth Governments. The post is held currently by Mrs Graca Machel of Mozambique, who commenced her term of office in January 2001. Membership of the Foundation is not automatic but rather, voluntary. I am glad to say that 46 of the 54 governments of the Commonwealth are members, the most recent one being Belize. Associate membership of the Foundation is open to states and territories associated with Commonwealth member governments.

What the Foundation does

At the outset, in 1965, the Foundation's mandate was to ".....administer a fund for increasing interchanges between Commonwealth organisations in professional fields throughout the Commonwealth". In 1979 this original mandate was widened by decision of the Lusaka CHOGM. While the Foundation continued to serve and support professional groups and associations, other groups and fields of human endeavour were added: these included, in particular, activities in the field of arts and culture; and the work of what are generally called voluntary, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working in Commonwealth



Colin Ball

Put Your heart Into Business

By Sanjay Suri

THE COMMONWEALTH will set up a new global index to measure socially responsible investment at a business forum in Abuja later this week.

The forum is being held to promote business with an eye on sustainable development ahead of the heads of government meeting in Abuja.

The move to link business with goals of sustainable development and social responsibility – for long the domain of civil society and do-gooders – has got several governments interested. As many as eight heads of government are turning up early in Abuja to attend the business forum.

“We have studies that show that many giant companies and pension funds prefer to invest in businesses committed to socially responsible development,” chief executive officer of the Commonwealth Business Council (CBC) Mohan Kaul told TerraViva.

“But 97 percent of that investment goes into the developed world.”

The new index will link factors such as the gross national income (GNI) of a country, its purchasing power parity (PPP) index and the investment it is drawing. The index will show up what is being done or not, and also suggest what is possible by way of investment in developing countries among the Commonwealth.

“We are talking to a major fund manager,” Kaul said. “There already is an index like FTSE 4Good but we will create our own index.” The CBC index will have a greater focus on good that comes to the developing countries among the Commonwealth – and that means 50 of its 54 members other than Britain, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. The Commonwealth is a grouping of countries that were once a part of the British Empire.

“But while a lot of the investment is not going into developing countries, it

is also true that many developing countries have not created a business environment that would encourage companies to compete in the international arena,” Kaul said. “At Abuja we are working for a manifesto for business and government together to remove obstacles to wealth creation.”

The moves are led by a new push into business partnerships that involve private companies, the government and civil society.

The Commonwealth will also set up a certification system for companies that can be players in the international arena. This together with the new index would also give potential investors and companies in the developed world pointers to companies they can do business with.

The moves by the CBC are more than just more Commonwealth talk. Forums organised by the CBC led to business worth more than 3 billion dollars in 1999 and 2.3 billion dollars

last year, Kaul said. “The largest component of this was business between developed and developing countries,” he said.

Much of the business has come up in infrastructure, mining and power projects, telecom services and financial services. The CBC has been holding regional forums to promote business among firms from Commonwealth countries within regions. Africa investment forums have been held in South Africa and also in Abuja.

The CBC has found unique ways to make these business marriages work. Businessmen are persuaded to attend business forums. Everyone who comes along gets a password and a homepage on the forum website, and access to everyone else who has registered. So you have everyone’s business interests on the dedicated website, and an idea what they are looking for.

The CBF then assembles a diary and puts together everyone who ought at

least to talk. It then asks what happened once they met, and offers to make things happen if nothing did. Some successes:

- The CBC played a role in getting MTN of South Africa to make a massive investment in the mobile telephone market in Nigeria. MTN executives were invited to meetings at the ministry of telecom in Nigeria. MTN is now the leading mobile phone company in Nigeria.

- The South African power giant Eskom Enterprises was put together with the National Electricity Production Agency (NEPA) in Nigeria. It now plans to take over several of the divisions into which NEPA has been divided.

- The South African firm Shivacom made a deal to sell pre-paid telephone cards in Mozambique following business to business meetings set up by the CBC. The deal is expected to lead to several others.



New Foundation Strengthens Commonwealth

Continued from Page 1

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countries as well as at a pan-Commonwealth level.

As a result of this change of mandate the Foundation’s focus broadened considerably during the 1980s, albeit with the focus still on people, and on people-to-people interaction, whether among professionals, artists, or voluntary sector workers. In the field of arts and culture, a number of activities were instigated, including the Commonwealth Writers Prize. Relationships were established with regional, national NGO umbrella/coordinating organisations, and many other NGOs, and from 1991 onwards, the Foundation took the initiative to organise a Commonwealth NGO Forum, which has brought together NGO leaders from around the Commonwealth during the year of every other CHOGM – that is on a 4-yearly cycle. The first such Forum was held in Harare in 1991, and the fourth will be in Abuja in 2003, where it will be called the Commonwealth Civil Society Meeting.

While there is neither space nor need here to list all the activities in which the Foundation is involved, our mandate is such that the canvas on which it paints its modest resources is a large one. All these years on from the Foundation’s establishment our mission statement currently (since 2001 in fact) now reads as follows:

“The Foundation is an inter-governmental organisation resourced by and reporting to Commonwealth governments. Its mission is two-fold:

- **Civil society:** To strengthen the ability of citizens and civil society organisations to work together, and with government and the private sector, towards the achievement of fundamental Commonwealth purposes and values, and especially those relating to good governance, people-centred and sustainable development and poverty eradication.

- **The People’s Commonwealth:** To facilitate pan-Commonwealth and inter-country connections between people, their associations and communities at all levels so as to encourage and enable mutual learning in the fields of personal, professional and community development, and arts and culture; and to recognise and celebrate excellence and achievement in these fields.

To put the two parts of the mission more simply, the Foundation is, in large measure about making *connections*, and

in particular two types of connection. Firstly, that connection that must exist between people and government, and secondly the connection that that must exist between people themselves, to share and learn from one another at all levels, including across the Commonwealth.

But there is little point in connecting people with one another and with government unless at least one party has something to say to the other. So in recent times we have developed this very brief statement which seeks to convey the very essence of our work and purposes:

“Creating change by making people’s voices heard”

“People’s voices” – meaning what? For the Foundation these voices come in two forms. First the direct voices of people themselves; and second, the voices of civil society organisations. The origins of listening to and making heard the voices of people themselves go back six years. Between 1997 and 1999 the Foundation carried out an ambitious project called *Civil Society in the New Millennium*. Through the project, we interviewed some 10,000 Commonwealth citizens, across 47 countries. Or in other words we found and heard their voices. Most of them

The Foundation is about making connections among people, and between people and governments

were the kinds of voices who don’t often get sought out, let alone heard. We asked them three questions:

- *What is your view of a ‘good society’? To what extent does such a society exist today?*

- *In such a ‘good society’ what roles are best played by citizens and what roles are best played by state institutions and other sectors?*

- *What would enable citizens to play their roles more effectively in the development of such a society in the future?*

What emerged from the project is that people see three ‘building blocks’ at the heart of a good, well-functioning society. Basic needs are met: for food, shelter, security, peace, human rights,

health and education. In addition people are able to *associate* with one another for the purposes of common good and want the rights needed for them to do so. Finally government – whether local, national, regional, Commonwealth or global – is inclusive, participatory and accountable.

Three other clear, common themes that emerged from the study: the voices say that a ‘good society’ would be characterised by:

- a strong state *and* a strong civil society. These are seen as complements, not alternatives. A strong state meaning in particular a facilitating, listening and empowering state as well as a ‘doing’ state. A strong state meaning one that encourages and enables civil society actions in other words

- a deepened democratic culture, one that is “not merely a matter of ballot boxes on election day” as the Commonwealth Secretary-General Don McKinnon has put it. A *participatory* democracy; a democracy characterised by inclusive *governance* rather than exclusive *government*;

- a more active role for citizens, which means treating them not as subjects, mere voters or passive beneficiaries, but as *empowered partners* in social, economic and political development.

The Foundation presented these findings to the 1999 Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Durban, and in their Communique they stated that:

“...people must be directly involved in the decision-making process and in the implementation of development plans and programmes ... [Heads of Government] noted the significance of civil society in empowering people to benefit from globalisation, in contributing towards goals of poverty elimination, equal opportunity and fair distribution of resources, and in helping to deal more effectively with ethnic, racial and religious conflicts...”

And in their Fancourt Declaration on Globalisation and People Centred Development issued at the same meeting, they added:

“...if the poor and the vulnerable are to be at the centre of development, the process must be participatory, in which they have a voice ... good governance and economic progress are directly linked ... good governance requires inclusive and participatory processes...”

It is clear that there is a substantial, if not complete, coincidence between

the voices of citizens the stated views of government leaders. And I would also add here that there was also a substantial coincidence in our findings between the voices of citizens in the so-called developed countries and those of citizens in the so-called developing countries.

Since 1999 the Foundation has been following up the *Civil Society in the New Millennium* study with its *Citizens and Governance Programme*. It has had a simple objective: to come up with practical answers to a key question: ‘how can citizen voice and participation in governance be achieved?’ At this CHOGM and Civil Society Meeting here in Abuja this week, the Foundation will be releasing the first results of this programme.

I noted earlier that there is a second source of voice that the Foundation tries to seek out and make heard: this is often, and perhaps rather confusingly, called ‘the voice of civil society’. I say ‘confusingly’ because the many organisations and associations that comprise ‘civil society’ – of faith, of labour, of youth, of NGOs, of the media, of thousands of specialised concerns and interests – cannot be said, or indeed expected, to have a singular voice. Indeed, it is very difficult to define what exactly civil society is!

That said, and necessarily left aside here, the Foundation, by virtue of its intergovernmental status, its role in serving civil society across the Commonwealth, and its consequent ability to offer a ‘safe space’, sees its role as enabling and facilitating dialogue, understanding and partnership in that space between the governmental and civil society sectors, and indeed between the private and civil society sectors. We endeavour to do this at every opportunity – one such being the opportunity of the CHOGM itself. That is why we are here in Abuja this week: not just to organise, with our partners in Nigeria (including government Ministries and civil society organisations), that space called the Commonwealth People’s Forum, but also to connect that space with the CHOGM itself.

Why is it important? Because if the voices of people and of civil society don’t connect with one another, through dialogue, misunderstanding and mistrust are likely to flourish, and in a world beset by so many urgent and pressing needs and concerns, that gets us nowhere.

What AIDS Does to Widows

The tragedy of AIDS is so much the greater when it hits someone as vulnerable as a widow. On World AIDS Day December 1, women argue for tougher laws against traditions that make AIDS worse

By Toye Olori

AS THE Aids pandemic reaches its second and killing wave across the continent, the number of widows is steadily increasing, making this core of women more vulnerable and in more desperate need of protection than ever before.

Traditional widowhood practices can also spread HIV infection with certain types of sexual cleansing and attendant early marriage for young children. This second Aids wave is giving new impetus to the push for the reform of harmful traditional practice,

the Commonwealth Peoples Forum heard on World Aids day yesterday.

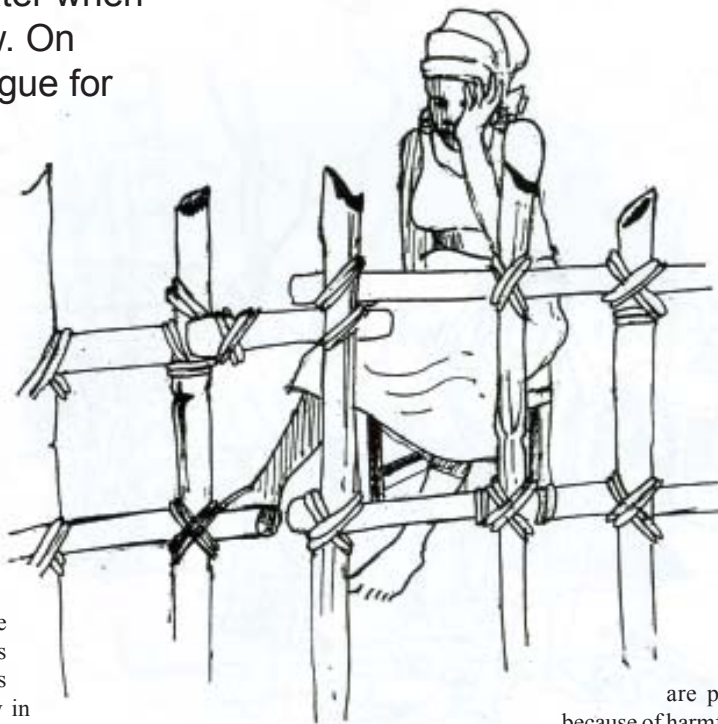
Activists at the forum want the Nigerian government to set the pace by following the lead of Enugu State which has legislated against harmful widowhood practices. The ban on these practices should be extended across the country through a law in the National Assembly, they said.

Participants at the Forum also want widows to be given employment in government

establishments or be trained to discourage their going into prostitution for survival. They want banks to give special incentives to couples who operate joint accounts so that widows are not left destitute.

Enugu state is the only state in Nigeria which has legislated against all forms of harmful traditional widowhood practices. Offenders are fined 5 000 Naira or face a two-year prison term.

The legislation reaches deep into the ambit of tradition to protect women and stave off the growth of HIV infection. Among harmful traditional practices frowned at by the legislation are



practices which confine a widow to a place in the compound for three months without having a bath.

Widows are sometimes forced into a second marriage with a brother-in-law or any surviving male relation. In other cases, they can be disinherited of their husbands' property while in certain communities, a widow is forced to perform certain cleansing rituals during which she is forced to have sexual intercourse with the chief priest of the shrine.

In her paper on harmful traditional widowhood practices and HIV/AIDS, Eleanor Nwadinobi, President of the Widows Development Organisation, a non-governmental organization based in Enugu, Eastern Nigeria, said in the context of HIV/AIDS, African widows

are particularly vulnerable because of harmful traditional practices.

"The practices which have direct relationship to HIV/AIDS are early marriages, widow inheritance and sexual cleansing. The practice of early marriage means that young brides are facing widowhood at an earlier age because of older husbands dying of AIDS," she said.

"Stressing the violation of widow's rights in terms of HIV/AIDS may ensure that the rights of all widows gain greater public and international attention," Nwadinobi said.

"We can play our part as participants at this Commonwealth NGO Forum by asking questions and challenging actions, by exercising our rights in the face of opposition, we must expose decisions that are fundamentally faulty," she said.

Women Ask for Rights by Law

A NATIONAL coalition to promote the international Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) has called on the Nigerian government to domesticate CEDAW in accordance with international obligations.

The group comprising members of the Civil Resource Development and Documentation Centre (CIRDDOC), Coalition of Eastern NGOs (CENGOS) and the Open Society Initiative for West Africa (OSIWA), also called on the government to establish special measures to ensure the promulgation of appropriate laws; support the efforts through regulations and policies that will ensure the availability of and access to positions of leadership for women in Nigeria.

In the Abuja Declaration on Affirmative Action for Increased Women's Political Participation in Nigeria released at the Commonwealth People's Forum, the group urged the government to provide a minimum of 30 per cent of the seats to women in elective and appointed positions in all government bodies.

The coalition is also calling on the government and civil society to take action and strengthen programmes and networking opportunities to provide affirmative action for women at all levels of representation in the country.

It noted that the numbers of women in governmental decision-making positions at all levels fall far short of the desired requirement for equality between the genders in Nigeria.



Come on Commonwealth, Open Up

By Sanjay Suri

THE COMMONWEALTH heads of government meeting beginning in the Nigerian capital this week is committed to promotion of development and democracy – both in heavy deficit among member countries. The answer is open government, says a new report ahead of the meeting.

"Entrenching people's right to access information is the most practical way of achieving this," says the report 'Open Sesame' prepared by the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI).

The report is asking heads of government to immediately implement "liberal access to information laws developed by people and governments working in close cooperation." It is asking the institutions of the Commonwealth itself to put in place disclosure and information sharing policies. "Without this, the quest for robust democracy and rapid development will never be realised," the report says.

"Open government is notoriously absent in the majority of Commonwealth member states," the report says. "Only 11 out of 54 Commonwealth countries have access to information laws." Others have guarantees in the Constitution but few enabling laws to activate them, the report says.

Does this go back to colonial days and British rule? The Commonwealth

is after all a group of countries that were once ruled by the British.

That hangover can be heavy, the report says. "Colonial authorities which owed no duty to subject populations purposefully used secrecy to signal their power and distance," the report says. "A culture of secrecy permeated government, and systems to keep information from the public became embedded."

The report adds: "Today, except in a handful of countries, governments enthusiastically retain and indeed embrace these symbols of supremacy as if there has been no intervening change from colonial to constitutional governance. Official secrets acts, preventive detention and anti-terrorist legislation, criminal defamation laws, overly indulgent contempt and privilege laws, media and privacy regulations and restrictive civil service rules all remain very much intact."

The report is asking the Commonwealth heads of government meeting this year (CHOGM 2003) to declare that the right to information is central to democracy and development.

The CHRI is seeking several specific measures from the Commonwealth:

- It must assist member countries to design and implement effective access to information regimes.
- It must open up its own ministerial meetings and CHOGMs "which currently remain so stubbornly inaccessible."
- Declarations are not enough; member countries must be required to

report progress on this front at each CHOGM, held every two years.

The report is asking member countries to introduce liberal access to information laws by the next CHOGM in 2005. It is asking specifically for proactive publication of information about, for example the basic activities of government departments, their rules of operation and procedure, decision-making criteria, performance indicators, points of public access and financial information including expenditure.

"Governments do not own information," the report says. "Rather, information is a public good in much the same way as clean air, electricity and water. Government is a vast storehouse of information. The information kept by government holds the memory of the nation and supplies a full portrait of its activities and performance."

The CHRI report points to fundamental areas in which information becomes central to democracy and to development.

Take poverty. Many of the populations that are worst off live in India, Nigeria, Pakistan and Bangladesh, whose populations together amount to 90 percent of the Commonwealth. But development strategies have often failed because of the closed environment between governments and donors without involvement of the people, the report says.



"Poor people know what they want but are out of the habit of questioning aloof governments," the report says. But governments and donors have not been willing to open up. "Yet the Commonwealth insists that it is committed to development in partnership with people and civil society."

Access to information is a core feature of participatory democracy. But Commonwealth citizens are struggling because of lack of information. In India, for example, the criminal background of candidates is withheld from people, the report says, despite an order from the Election Commissioner.

The Commonwealth is relying on free markets and equitable economic

growth to quicken development, the report says. "The right to information provides crucial support to the market-friendly good governance principles of transparency and accountability. Markets, like governments, do not function well in secret."

The report adds: "The free flow of information ensures that markets work for people rather than corporations. It helps level a playing field that is currently heavily skewed in favour of big business."

Guaranteed right of access to information is essential also for fighting corruption, the report says. "Corruption undermines democracy. It creates a culture of impunity destroying the rule of law and creating a class of overlords who need secrecy to keep their dark deeds hidden in dark places." It is no coincidence that "countries with access to information laws are also perceived to be the least corrupt."

Right to information laws are necessary also to "peel back the layers of bureaucratic red tape and political sleight of hand and get to the 'hard facts'," the report says. "Armed with information, even the most marginalised of citizens can take action in their own interests."

But the means of getting that message across to the leaders at the Abuja CHOGM will be the bureaucracy itself. Like the leaders at Abuja, the Commonwealth itself is on test this week for its support to open governance.

Today in Abuja

9.00 – 17.00

Commonwealth Civil Society Meeting On Development And Democracy

Yar'Adua Centre Auditorium
Commonwealth Foundation
[Invitation Only]

9.00 – 11.00

Humanism And Participation In Governance

Protea Hotel
Organised by the Nigerian Humanist Movement

9.00 – 13.00

Internal Security/Human Development Strategy For Africa

Protea Hotel
Organised by Agency for African Families in Distress

9.00 – 17.00

Community Participation In Promotion Of Education For All

Protea Hotel
Change Managers International Network

10.00 – 12.00

Discussion On Reading Culture As A Tool For National Development

Commonwealth Market Hut 12

11.00 – 13.00

Challenges For Governances In The Niger Delta

Protea Hotel
Organised by Rivers Economic Development Forum

12.00 – 14.00

Affirmative Action For Increasing Women's Political Participation In Nigeria

Protea Hotel
Organised by Civil Resource Development and Documentation Centre

14.00 – 15.00

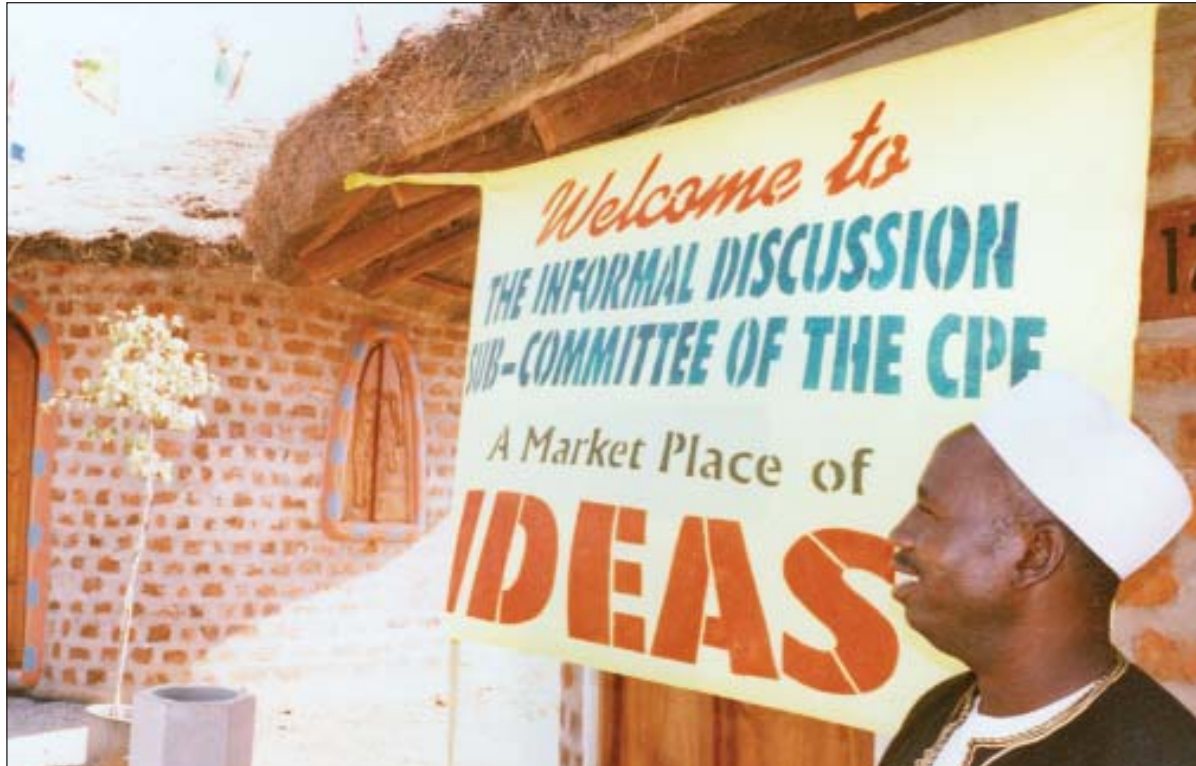
Launch of the Commonwealth Pharmaceutical Association Statement on HIV/AIDS

Protea Hotel
Organised by the Commonwealth Pharmaceutical Association

14.00 – 17.00

Seminar On Democracy And Development In The Commonwealth

Protea Hotel
Organised by the Centre for Democracy and Development



The marketplace can be a place also for conflicting ideas

HRW Report Raps Nigeria

THE NIGERIAN government has been responsible for killings, torture, and harassment of its critics over the last two years, Human Rights Watch charged in a report published Tuesday.

Human Rights Watch urged Commonwealth leaders meeting in Abuja this week to raise concerns about the crackdown on freedom of expression in the country.

"Foreign governments remained virtually silent about election violence in Nigeria, yet abuses during the Zimbabwe elections provoked widespread condemnation," said Peter Takirambudde, executive director of the Africa division of Human Rights Watch. "Unless the Commonwealth addresses abuses in all of its member countries and denounces them accordingly, it will stand accused of maintaining double standards and its credibility will be undermined. There is no excuse for Commonwealth leaders to turn a blind eye to human rights abuses in the very country where they are meeting."

The 40-page HRW report, 'Nigeria: Renewed Crackdown on Freedom of

Expression' documents killings, arrest, detention, ill-treatment, torture and other forms of harassment and intimidation of "real or perceived critics of the government" over the past two years. Most of these abuses have been carried out by the Nigerian police or by members of the intelligence services known as the State Security Service (SSS), the report says.

"Commonwealth leaders meeting in Abuja should not give Nigeria a free pass on human rights," said Takirambudde. "Even though military rule has ended, Nigerians still cannot express themselves freely without fear of grave consequences."

Brutal measures have been used to repress critical expression, the HRW report says. "In the most serious cases, people have been shot dead simply for exercising their right to protest. During massive public protests in July at an increase in the price of fuel, between 12 and 20 people were shot dead by the police in Lagos, in the oil city of Port Harcourt, and on the outskirts of Abuja. The victims included peaceful

protestors and passersby who were not even involved in the protests."

The report also contains the testimonies of individuals who were among a group of around 30 people arrested after staging a peaceful protest outside the U.S. embassy in Abuja against U.S. President George W. Bush's visit to Nigeria in July. They were detained for two weeks and several were tortured on direct instructions from the highest levels of the police force.

"President Obasanjo's promises of democracy mean little as long as people are being detained, tortured and shot simply for expressing views critical of the government," said Takirambudde. "No one has been brought to justice for these acts."

The Human Rights Watch report also talks of the harassment of opposition party supporters and other political activists since the April and May elections, in which President Obasanjo and his ruling People's Democratic Party won a comfortable victory.

Human Rights Watch condemns Nigeria for continuing rights abuses. But at the Commonwealth people's marketplace writers gather to celebrate their new freedom. Two views, two reports.



Now To Be A Nigerian

By Ferial Haffajee

TO GET a taste of who will fill the quills of Nigeria's literary greats like Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka and Buchi Emecheta, head down to the Commonwealth Peoples Market to the stall of the Association of Nigerian Authors.

General-secretary Nduka Otiono says Nigerian writing is going through a renaissance, with a new generation of scribes revealing their talents. The phenomenon has come on the coat-tails of democracy with many writers now venting their anger at the dictatorship years of Sani Abacha.

But this flowering faces a dilemma. "One of the major challenges has been filling the lacuna left in the publishing world by the post SAP [structural adjustment programme] decline," says Otiono, himself a poet and journalist. Major publishers like Heinemann and Penguin have slashed

their African literature title offerings because of a lack of sales.

The ANA has tried to fill the gap by publishing anthologies because "this army of new writers want to be heard". Their titles reveal their major theme of political lamentation: "Trembling leaves", "Cramped rooms" and a "Volcano of voices" give readers some sense of what's in store. All are on sale at the market.

Complementing ANA's efforts, says, Otiono are a plethora of self-published novels, one of which scooped the Michael Caine prize for African writing earlier this year.

Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor's "Weight of Whispers" took the prize, while Helon Habila's book "Waiting for an Angel" – also self-published – has now been republished and packaged by Penguin. "The prizes have empowered and given confidence," says Otiono.

The writers stand is a birds-eye view into contemporary Nigerian thought and

interest. In among the literary works, are numerous self-help tomes and many books on how to get on in business – all pointing to the profusion of new pursuits in Nigeria. In an atmosphere where getting ahead is all-consuming, the literary anthologies on sale are a refreshing reminder that not all thought is lost to the markets.

The bookstall includes a little book all visitors should look at: "How to be a Nigerian".

An hilarious satire by Peter Enahoro, he starts by saying Nigerians can be

found all over the continent, so the book is a guide both for the nation themselves and for those with whom they come into contact: "You will find them [Nigerians] in the heart of the Congo too, selling elephant tusks of Congolese elephants to the Congolese." He goes on to explain the "dash" – the "sweetly quaint custom of expressing gratitude in anticipation of services about to be rendered". His countrymen are insulted by the description of "dash" as bribery.

Around Abuja

IT CAN be a job moving from one centre to another in these days of Commonwealth meetings. Meetings are being held at the Yar'Adua centre of course. But also at Protea hotel, at Rockview hotel, at other centres. So how do you get anywhere?

Tried the Okada? Meaning "going". In a fashion, that is. To take the Okada is to ride pillion on a motorcycle. This two-wheel single-seat taxi is quite the only transport to ride in where more conventional taxis fear to tread.

What works for remote areas works even better on busy roads. This is the transport to beat all traffic jams, and Abuja is not free of them, as many of us discovered Monday evening.

There is one problem, though. Local people have become skilled at riding without holding on to the driver. Visitors must deal with this situation as they see fit.

FORGET PHONE etiquette, in Abuja you leave your cellular phone on and hope someone calls just so that you can rush out of a meeting or even pretend you forgot to switch it off.

"You have to show people how indispensable you are by allowing your phone ring during meetings, the bigger the meeting the better," says Buchi Anyadike, an information assistant at the Commonwealth civic society forum in Abuja.

"I think people need to be taught some telephone manners," said a grumpy delegate, wondering how she was going to do this without abrogating peoples right to communication.

This telephone business led to a formal demand at the opening meeting of the CPF for switching off all mobile phones for the duration of the conference. Who ever said that freedom does not come at a price.

AFTER THE hectic to-ing and fro-ing from one meeting to another, talking gender, poverty and food security, a group of women dressed in the flamboyant headgear and colours that only west African women can pull off with a panache, headed for a slap-up meal at the Makasa leisure castle.

"Not to party, but to forget the worries of the day so that we can live to fight another day," one said.

The women said the night life in Abuja was 'phenomenal' and that they would probably dance the night away at the Nikon sit-out club where the high life was 'rejuvenating'.

The women organized their evening with military precision. A bus was hired to take them to their places of entertainment with strict instructions that the driver would not touch a drop of alcohol and would stay awake until the wee hours of the morning to drive them back to their hotel. Sobering thoughts.

Ironically, while the older women are organising a wild night, the young girls manning the information centre at the conference site are planning a quiet night to rest their bruised feet. "We are going to quietly eat our supper and go home to sleep," one said. "It is too much work for us, we are tired and need the rest."