

# TERRAVIVA

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

## Civil Society Prepares for 'Civil War'

By Ukpong E. Ukpong

CIVIL SOCIETY organizations at the Commonwealth People's Forum are preparing to take on their chief guest over lunch Wednesday. The chief guest is none other than Secretary-General Don McKinnon.

McKinnon is due to arrive at the Yar'Adua centre for what is listed politely as a listening exercise and for an exchange of ideas with civil society groups. But the meeting promises to be less than entirely polite. Civil society organizations are becoming increasingly impatient with what they see as their marginalization in the Commonwealth processes.

"There is a near revolt among civil society leaders," according to a well-placed source working closely with the Commonwealth Foundation. "Even the World Bank, the International Monetary

Fund and the World Trade Organisation have better systems for representations by civil society."

In the Commonwealth, he said, civil society groups have to deal with the Commonwealth Foundation. "That has meant that in effect we are formally cut off from access to the political wings of the Commonwealth," he said.

The move is snowballing by the day. "There is a huge gap between rhetoric and reality," says Ezra Mbogori, a member of the Civil Society Advisory Board of the Commonwealth. "The secretariat talks of a desire to help, but we haven't seen it yet. When we really start talking about issues, they are nowhere to be seen. These concerns need to be put to the offices of the Secretariat."

That concern will be expressed at the Wednesday meeting. "If delegates feel frustrated and disappointed, then this

cannot be just an exchange of niceties," Mbogori said. "The Secretary-General must tell us for real what will happen."

McKinnon is expected to make opening remarks for a few minutes, and then face the expected barrage of questions for an hour or so.

"It is becoming clear by the day that it cannot go on being business as usual," Mbogori said. "We have reached a point where we feel this inherent politeness is not getting us anywhere."

Mbogori said civil society members need access to the heads of government "and a development of mechanisms that generate greater accessibility to both the Secretariat and the Foundation. After all both organizations are funded by taxpayers."

Mbogori works for MWENGO, a civil society organisation active in eastern and southern Africa in supporting capacity building among

NGOs. The Harare-based group is particularly active in lobbying governments on behalf of NGOs.

Silam Hassan, a trade union activist from Malaysia says workers, the government and business have to come together to sort out issues. So similarly must the Commonwealth Secretariat, the Foundation and civil society.

"We just don't have enough say in what goes on," she says. "We are working with the people, and governments that take action in the name of the people must listen to us."

There is some expectation of seriousness on these issues. Discussions during today's deliberations could be indicative of the mindset of the Commonwealth Secretariat now and in the near future.

The move to confront the Secretariat is rapidly gaining pace.



Ezra Mbogori



The People's Forum is becoming in good measure also a women's forum

## Women's Issues to the Fore

"THE POLICE have taken over the people's forum," Nkoyo Toyo announced to us. She spoke with the kind of strength and conviction that has made many an insecure male quake (and there are so many).

The police had walked into the Yar'Adua complex Tuesday afternoon. That's the last thing Nkoyo Toyo wanted to see here: guns and uniforms.

Maybe it was coincidence that the police left just as soon as she spoke. We like to think not.

Nkoyo Toyo speaks for the rights of women, for the rights of people. And how she does. Women's issues are at the fore at the Commonwealth People's Forum; how could they not with the likes of her and Hazel Brown around.

Hazel Brown has campaigned 40 years now for women's rights in

Trinidad and Tobago. Her campaign has done so much to double the representation of women in local government in just a few years.

### A special report on women's issues at the People's Forum

But there is more at the centre, at the village that speaks of an ever stronger women's voice. Like the bank that village women have set up in Nigeria for some reasons that are obvious, and for some that are not.

Another group is here to speak of its campaign to take commercial sex workers off the streets. It is working to build their capacity in other areas.

And like Brown in Trinidad a group of Nigerian women are here to talk about their campaign to support women in political life. That group and Brown's inevitably have had much to talk about. Just the sort of thing the People's Forum is there for.

A meeting on affirmative action declared that one in three of those elected next time in 2007 should be women. That is still short of the goal of 50 percent, but it has been taken up for now as goal enough.

The women were in fiery mood. They adopted a demanding tone for rights long overdue. And that is becoming the tone of the people's forum. This is not turning out to be the colourful picnic on the side that some were expecting. See Special Report Pages 2 and 3.

## Toolkit Comes to Crank up Democracy

By Sanjay Suri

NO, IT isn't something to fix an old car with; it's a toolkit to fix democracies not going quite the way they should.

That name 'toolkit' was chosen deliberately.

"These are not general sort of recommendations on the kind of things that should be done," says Rajesh Tandon who has been overseeing the development of the toolkit. "These are examples of best practices that are out there and which can easily be implemented in other places as well."

An example is the progress documented by women groups in Uganda, Belize and India. A study shows how women groups in these countries have built themselves up to take on leadership in local bodies. It looks at the role played by the women, and the support they got from civil society and the political systems that helped that happen.

One study looks at the private sector, government and civil society organizations working together to provide drinking water in Uganda and Jamaica. Efforts made in The Gambia and India to get street children off the streets form another model.

The toolkit holds up several practical models. In Tanzania and Belize popular theatre was used to raise awareness. In

East London community organizers led meetings to raise awareness of minimum wage.

In 19 African countries citizens worked together in a programme to control river blindness. In Uttar Pradesh leaders from the panchayat, the village elected body, were encouraged after some initiatives to work with women's groups.

Under the toolkit, all these and more are held up as examples of successful action that could be replicated elsewhere.

"This is the first time such a toolkit has been put together," says Tandon. "It is unique material, it is practical experience that needs to be shared more widely. People are looking for practical ideas."

The group that prepared the toolkit got down to business after the Commonwealth Foundation presented a report to the heads of government meeting in Durban in 1999. The report was found promising; the Foundation was asked then to go back and prepare a definite plan and to suggest workable ways to implement those ideas.

A CD-ROM of the toolkit will be released in Abuja Thursday. Civil society groups will be invited to offer feedback and additions. A final toolkit is due to be presented by April next year.



# Oil Chokes Rights in Niger Delta

By Toye Olori

THE NIGER Delta which spans five Nigerian states suffers a cruel dilemma: located on some of the world's richest oil reserves, the region remains among the poorest in the country.

Unless government radically changed the way in which it controlled and managed the black gold, the region would continue to threaten instability in the rest of the country, said Austin Monday, president of the Rivers Economic Development Forum (REDEF) at the Commonwealth Peoples Forum yesterday.

He said unless government develops the Niger Delta region, it posed the

greatest single and immediate threat to the peace, stability, socio-political and cultural cohesion of the region.

Different ways needed to be found to ensure that the oil revenues filtered into the region from whence it came to encourage "human, infrastructural, social and economic development," the meeting heard.

In addition, the environmental consequences of the oil prospecting also required a firmer green hand.

"In view of the natural and livelihood disrupting character of oil prospecting and extraction activities in the region, the need to address the special environmental and developmental situation in the area has for decades been recognized but not adequately addressed," argued Monday.

Absolute ownership by the National Nigerian Petroleum Company (NNPC) was not working and activists want the federal government to consider moving toward a United Style system where land-owners control the leasing of the oil-lands and benefit the national fiscus through the tax-base.

"I believe landowners should manage their resources as it is done in the United States and pay tax to the Federal Government. If the government can adopt the political system of the US, I do not see any reason why it can not emulate what the US does in its resource distribution," said Pastor Timon Ehudu, also of REDEF.

A new plan was necessary because in spite of commissions, policies and programme initiatives in the Delta, most had failed because of the reluctance of the larger regions and ethnic groups to truly commit the nation's oil resources to the development of the area. Instead, oil revenues were disproportionately used in other states, charged Monday.

Mortality from the effects of oil spillage meant that the life expectancy rates were lower in the Delta, added Ehudu. He added: "Today we cannot boast of education in the region, our desire is that the government should give free education at all levels to our children.

"There is no job opportunity for our youths and that is why there is restiveness and crisis in the area. When youths have job, they will raise families and think of providing for them and use their time to do meaningful things, they will not be getting into trouble. They have problems because they are idle."

Ehudu also blamed the multinational oil companies for the crises in the region. "In order to achieve their selfish interests, oil companies especially Shell manipulate things and go through traditional rulers to whom they pay peanuts to lie against their people even when there is genuine spillage because

## Civil rights groups are highlighting loss of rights of local people in the Niger delta

of rusted pipelines, they deny such things happened."

Shell is the oldest oil company in Nigeria producing from 31,000 square kilometers area of the Niger Delta. The Rivers Economic Development Forum is a leading NGO in the Delta and its programmes are aimed empowering the indigenous people. These include skills training; micro-credit and business training models as well as leadership training.



## 30 Percent, For Now

By Ferial Haffajee

NIGERIAN ACTIVISTS want one in three politicians elected to be a woman. An affirmative action campaign is gathering steam to push for thirty percent legislated female representation at the next election, slated for 2007.

Women met on the sides of the Commonwealth Peoples Forum yesterday to highlight their call for more effective representation of women in politics. Yesterday's meeting followed the Abuja Declaration issued in September which "urged the government and civil society to take action and strengthen programmes and networking opportunities to promote affirmative action for women at all levels of representation in Nigeria". In addition to representation in elected office, women also want a proportion of jobs in the civil service reserved.

Whereas women in Southern Africa achieved commitment for a one third quota in the Eighties, West Africa lags behind and Nigeria is now attempting to take up the slack.

In Southern Africa, the lobby has now moved on from the one third quota to a 50/50 call for gender parity. Also

known as the zebra principle, women are now pushing for political candidature lists to be comprised of one woman for every man.

In Nigeria, a long haul for even the lower quota seems likely. Nana Tankoh of the Open Society Initiative of West Africa (OSIWA) said resistance was spread across the key areas of Nigerian society.

"Affirmative action is resisted at the community level by traditional and religious leaders. There is resistance in political parties, where women are not engaged [in the centre of power] where the lists are prepared." Even civil society has not risen to the occasion. Affirmative action must be pursued as a political front, but individualism continued to be the modus operandi for non-governmental organisations, complained Tankoh. "Civil society is not coming together in a coalition."

It's a good thing that women are starting the lobby four years early – it will be painstaking work building consciousness from the community level upwards. Women had to be shown what benefits more equitable gender representation could bring. "Once they are given bags of salt and rice during

elections, they [women] are fine," said Gozie Udemeze of the Women's Aid Collective.

And it will be an even bigger struggle to win over leading women to take up a life in politics as electoral violence drove them from the polls, not only as candidates but as voters too.

Yesterday's meeting was a first attempt to begin to knit together the coalition that will build support for the affirmative action campaign. Its first major campaign is likely to be one that lobbies government to establish the legal framework necessary to make affirmative action work. This will mean changing the electoral act to provide for a gender quota.

Nigeria has ratified the United Nations Convention for the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), but now needs to localise the impact of the convention by passing national laws to make it a real rather than just a paper commitment. "CEDAW provides for temporary positive measures for women," said activist Oby Nkwankwo, explaining that government had many options available to build up its gender armory.

## But Not Really an Island

By Ferial Haffajee

NO COUNTRY in a globalised world is an island, not even her own idyllic nation of Malta, says Doris Bingley, the general-secretary of the National Council of Women.

"Malta, like all other countries cannot any longer close its borders to foreign influence, and therefore the consequences that the globalisation process can have on women needs careful consideration," she adds.

In Malta, the information technology and tourism industries have grown exponentially, and the task of the country's women's movement was to ensure that women were not marginalised from the economic moment. Bingley believes that "More opportunities are needed so that women can adapt to IT literacy. There is the need for closer partnership to speed up the implementation of IT programmes for women."

Like other emerging economies, Malta is capitalising on its IT skills and



Doris Bingley

networks to win data processing work from the wealthy centres of the North like Europe and the United States. Women workers are the foot-soldiers in these new industries and this required

new policy and thought to consider the implications. "The economic and social implications on women, family cohesion and fertility rates require careful research and analysis in dealing with the issue of women and work to identify both the strengths and the weaknesses of the current state of affairs," she says.

Another essential step, believes Bingley, is to bring more women into decision-making roles in the private and public sectors to ensure "a more balanced approach... a culture of peace can develop strategies to encounter the process of globalisation..."

A gender lens and women's empowerment can ensure that globalisation does not storm Malta, but wash over the island like a gentle rain. The Commonwealth brings together some of the world's largest countries, like Nigeria, and some of its smallest, like Malta.

What Bingley's concerns show is that gender concerns have a universality, regardless of size.

# TERRAVIVA

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# Women Begin to Market their Power

By Zarina Geloo

TENDING THEIR stands at the Commonwealth Peoples Market, the Nigerian women associations present a formidable array of female power, as they "sell" their array of wares: empowerment, confidence and solidarity.

They are a no nonsense lot, with their colourful traditional garb and strident speech, these women by their own definition are defeating ignorance, disease and want." nestled behind the main Commonwealth Peoples Forum site at Yar' Aduar.

"Feminisation of poverty and pauperisation of women can have no place in the sane society or in our modern world," Alhaja Agoro from the Country Women Association of Nigeria (COWAN) told visitors to the stand on Tuesday

Pulling her wrapper snugly around her waist she proceeds to give a proud account of an organization which from its humble beginnings was dogged by disbelief, "because people generally believe that women cannot do anything by themselves."

COWAN was established in 1982 with its main goal to empower women to get out of their poverty without abrogating African traditional norms and practices.

One of the major focus is the African Traditional Responsive Banking, (ATRB), a unique savings backed credit system that merges and refines traditional and formal practices to help women attain credit, save and create wealth.

"As you know traditional banks have lending policies which women cannot meet." Women fell back to informal saving and credit societies which did not generate savings enough for capital investment, so we had to do something," Agoro says.

The ARTB is only for COWAN members and they access the banking



Women bankers at the Commonwealth marketplace

service through a daily savings programme. By saving continuously in small amounts according to their income, the women are able to build significant savings as financial assets; leverage their savings by accessing working capital and investment credits to increase their productivity and profitability of their economic activities and accumulate surplus capital beyond that which is necessary to repay their loans.

In addition to serving as a means to capital accumulation, the daily savings programme is the key to eventual ownership by COWAN members of a financial institution.

"It works" Agoro says pointing at her colleagues she adds, "these women could not talk and look someone in the face before, now see them, they are talking confidently with hands on their

hips, because they know who they are what they are worth they don't beg anybody."

COWAM now has 7000 co operative groups and a total membership of 260,00.

"We have taken young girls off the street and into the class room, the business world and employment sector, all in one sweep," the glamorous Oluwatoyin Asuni, says of her organization, the Centre for Rehabilitation and Training (CERAT). Asuni who is driven by her need to give to the community as she has given to her own children, says CERAT takes a special interest in children in need and young girls who have turned to commercial sex work.

Youths are taken off parks, and streets and are taught through an adult literacy programme. The young girls are

trained in sewing, braiding, and skills that will enable them start up businesses. Those who show aptitude are given computer and management skills.

"We help them get jobs and provide seed money so that they never have to sell sex again," says Asuni.

CERAT which began two years ago, operates in the Lagos area and so far rehabilitated 67 girls and 30 boys.

Women's Aid Collective (WACOL) is on a roll. Joy Ezilo who heads this human rights organization says she is happy WACOL has been able to create awareness on gender and democracy and was especially vibrant during the just ended general and presidential elections in Nigeria.

"While the organizations vision is to promote a democratic society free from violence and abuse, we were very active

"We have taken young girls off the street and into the class room, the business world and employment sector, all in one sweep," the glamorous Oluwatoyin Asuni, says of her organization, the Centre for Rehabilitation and Training (CERAT)"

in getting women participate in politics."

Ezilo said she was happy with the level of participation of women in Nigerian elections and WACOL will assist more potential female politicians with legal and financial aid.

A practicing lawyer, Ezilo says the organization acts as a lobby for women's issues particularly legislative changes and the enforcement of legal and police protection.

WACOL also runs a shelter for battered wives and provides sexual and reproductive health services for women and young people.

WACOL was founded in 1997 with headquarters in Enugu and has observer status with the African Commission on Human and People's Rights. The group is now networking with other similar organisations.

## Two Women with One Mission

### Hazel Brown speaks up in Trinidad and Tobago

By Sanjay Suri

HAZEL BROWN does not need to say much; it is what she has done, and been recognized so well for doing, that speaks for itself.

She has led a women's movement in tiny Trinidad & Tobago that has sent waves far beyond the little islands with a population of about 1.5 million or so.

In 1996 there were 26 elected women members in a local government council of 124. Three years later in 1999 42 women were elected.

Hazel Brown has been moving to empower women for the last 40 years, about all of her working life that is. Women's presence in elected councils was just about nothing when she began. And she will not be satisfied until she has got to at least 50 percent representation for women.

That makes sense, since she is an active member of the 50:50 worldwide campaign to put women into positions of power. That campaign includes many Commonwealth countries and Commonwealth organizations.

Brown has been remarkable for the way she has succeeded. The result is that women across the Commonwealth look to her to see how she did it.

No secret, that. She has it all in a book she has just written on

empowering women. "It is about telling women what to do and how to do it," Brown says. The book has found many interested women readers, naturally.

Empowering women to enter politics has been the thrust of her campaign, but that is not all. She has been working to promote maternal and child health, and on legislative reforms.

"We have identified ten bits of legislation in Trinidad & Tobago that potentially discriminate against women," she says. Domestic women workers are for instance not considered 'proper' workers, and are not given the rights that other workers have.

Trinidad & Tobago is not the only country with such legal loopholes. Her campaign has gone as a message to many other women's groups on how to fight such legislation.



### Nkoyo Toyo champions rights in Nigeria

By Toye Olori

SIX KEY areas of concern are likely to form the nucleus of civil society's representation to the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting later this week, says Nkoyo Toyo, the executive director of the Lagos-based Gender and Development Action (GADA) and chairperson of the Commonwealth Peoples Forum 2003 steering committee.

Topping the list is human rights and governance followed by sustainable development, HIV and Aids, reproductive health, gender and the status of young people. Civil society will also put its perspective on the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), the Africa Growth and Opportunity Act and the World Trade Organisation's trade round into its final declaration.



For Nigerian civil society, "the predominant interest has come from groups advocating better governance and human rights which we consider the main issues CHOGM leaders need to address in Abuja," said Toyo.

"I think we cannot assume that because we have civil government in Nigeria that human rights issues have been solved. The question to access to justice for people who have been imprisoned is a human rights issue and there are others."

Fundamental is the recognition that women's rights are human rights. For eight years, GADA has carried out several programmes, including the first ever summit for women in politics – an event that led to women contesting elections.

According to Toyo, Nigerian women are better off now than before, as there is a greater consciousness today than it was before, not only with regard to political representation. "In the area of health, there is now a realisation that the health of men is as important as the health of women particularly in the area of reproductive health.

"The issue of women is a very pertinent issue, one that will continue to engage many of us for a long time to come.

## Today in Abuja

9.00 – 17.00

### Commonwealth Civil Society Meeting On Development And Democracy

Yar'Adua Centre Auditorium  
Organised by the Commonwealth Foundation [Invitation Only]

9.00 – 13.00

### Discussion: Combating Trafficking and Child Labour Across Borders

Protea Hotel Hall A  
Organised by the Women Trafficking and Child Labour Eradication Foundation

9.00 – 13.00

### Nigerian Civil Society Meeting

Protea Hotel Hall B  
Organised by Nigerian Civil Society of Cross River State

9.00 – 13.00

### Citizenship Indigeneity, Law and Policy

Protea Hotel Hall C  
Organised by Women's Aid Collective

9.00 – 17.00

### Meeting Organised by the Centre for Women's Studies and Intervention

Protea Hotel Hall E

12.30 – 14.00

### Cultural Networking as imperative for a Culture of Peace

Commonwealth Market Hut 12

12.30 – 14.00

### Question and Answer Session with the Commonwealth Secretary General the Honourable Don McKinnon

Yar'Adua Centre Auditorium

14.00 – 17.00

### Women and Information and Society

Protea Hotel  
Organised by the Commonwealth Women Network

14.00 – 17.00

### Seminar On Democracy And Development In The Commonwealth

Protea Hotel  
Organised by the Centre for Democracy and Development

14.00 – 17.00

### Girls' Power Initiative: a Strategy for Child Empowerment

Protea Hotel Hall C  
Organised by Girls' Power Initiative

16.00 – 18.00

### Culture as Heritage for Peaceful Co-existence Among the Commonwealth of Nations

Commonwealth Market Hut 12

17.30 – 19.00

### Yar'Adua Centre Auditorium

Forum Reports – Meeting organizers report on the outcomes of their meetings  
Organised by Commonwealth Foundation

### Performances at the Commonwealth - Children's Day

Children's Performing Group (Nigeria)  
Momodou Ceesay (The Gambia)  
National Theatre Company (UK)  
Madojazz Ensemble (South Africa)  
Zaaki Azzay Band (Nigeria)  
Impact Consult (Nigeria)  
Lagos Cultural Troupe (Nigeria) etc.



Fun and games, and dance, at the marketplace amphitheatre

## Labouring Without Rights

By Ferial Haffajee

MOST COMMONWEALTH governments are signatories to the core set of labour standards that can guarantee decent work, but few are enforcing the measures.

"In our experience, governments are being hypocritical," says Annie Watson, director of the Commonwealth Trade Union Council, adding "they are signing up but not enforcing".

A report by the Council to the Commonwealth Heads of Government finds that non-enforcement is pushing back trade union gains in many of its 51 member countries only three Commonwealth member states are not represented on the Council. A survey

carried out earlier this year by the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions unearthed trade union violations in 35 Commonwealth countries.

The core labour standards set out by the International Labour Organisation include the freedom of association; the right to collective bargaining; the outlawing and abolition of child and forced labour and the end to gender and other forms of discrimination. Nice commitments, but useless through inaction.

"The Commonwealth is very weak at criticising member governments," says Watson to explain why violations are so widespread. While the body had found its voice to denounce the erosion

of democracy in Pakistan and Zimbabwe, other violations of rights often went uncriticised. "Take Swaziland, for example. There is no freedom of association there, but it's hardly ever mentioned."

Globalisation with its attendant flows of investment capital into the developing South has also added to the culture of non-enforcement, says Watson. If governments are trying to attract new investments, they often promise not to enforce labour laws."

In addition, enforcement weapons – like effectively staffed inspectorates; working labour law systems and strong unions – are often notable only by their absence, says the CTUC. Its submission to CHOGM adds that, "We would like to see Commonwealth technical assistance being made available to assist Commonwealth governments meet their commitments to make the implementation of core labour standards a reality." Assistance is necessary not only because of the anaemic enforcement mechanisms available to unions, but also because labour organisations are losing members and power.

Increasingly, production is fracturing and workplaces getting smaller and smaller. This trend makes it difficult for unions to organise because it's always easier to campaign and sign up members on bigger shop-floors.

Developing countries are splitting more than before into first and second economies: first economies of development and high-end service sectors with second economies where work is increasingly informal and vulnerability is high.

It is in this second economy that the CTUC is focusing its work: in Zimbabwe, it is encouraging links between the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions and the informal sector; in Bangladesh and the rest of Southern Africa, the council is active in pushing to squeeze child labour out of the production chain and simultaneously lobbying for the basic labour rights of clothing and textile workers. Its slogan is: "Children out of work and into school; adults into work."

While economic reform has seen developing countries secure higher growth rates in some regions, the fall-out has been severe for trade union and labour rights, says the CTUC report. As state enterprises have been sold off, workers have lost their jobs as the work for life ethos of parastatals has hit the dust. Workers are, however, now beginning to fight back.

## Solitary Unions

By Zarina Geloo

THE NIGERIAN labour movement union was taken down a peg or two on Monday night when a well known gender activist asked why it had isolated itself from the rest of civil society and told it to get off its high horse and help build the institutional structures of other civic bodies.

Yemi Fela- Kuti a gender activist was speaking at the "Nigeria night: reflections on the status of civil society" at the Yar'Adua centre where the Commonwealth Peoples' Forum is meeting ahead of the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting.

Kuti said the trade union was the single non government body in Nigeria which had a strong and vibrant institutional structure and was powerful enough to take on government, but it stood alone, secure in its strength and did not engage other civic bodies.

She told the meeting that trade unions were traditionally the most well organized and powerful civic bodies in most countries. She referred to the trade union movement in South Africa which was a major player in the anti apartheid movement and was part of the process that secured the release of former president Nelson Mandela and other African National Congress (ANC) members from Robben Island.

"In Nigeria the trade union has stood alone. But it is such a powerful organization that it can help strengthen civic bodies both institutionally and programmatically."

## Around Abuja

WHILE SOME may decry the Commonwealth goings-on as irrelevant, the meetings may in fact be vital for the Nigerian economy. Word is that the Naira is on a spiral downward because Muslim pilgrims are buying up dollars ahead of the journey to Mecca. Also leading the currency's fall are citizens going off to the good life in the North for Christmas.

With delegates changing dollars by the bag-full with the money-changers in the bureau-de-change-under-the-trees across the Sheraton, the Naira could just regain some of its strength. Who said the Commonwealth was just an outdated old colonial clap-trap? It may not be able to save Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe from himself, but it could perhaps just do the trick on the Nigerian economy. Spend, people, spend.

AND SPEAKING of Naira ... anybody else noticed what seems to be a dire shortage of N50 notes? Whenever you're owed change of N50, be it for a newspaper, change from coffee, or anything else, the cashier miraculously runs out of the smaller notes. Print, mint, print.

FOR SOME seasoned hacks not used to press and other conferences Nigerian style, one correspondent was taken aback when an event was started with not one prayer, but two! A Christian woman willed God to help her government and to help it see the path toward gender equality. A Muslim man prayed that politicians would mend their pesky, corrupt ways.

After years of preaching good governance and protesting against bad governance, NGO's are now turning to a tried and tested recipe: God in any of his/her forms.

THE TERRA VIVA offices were stormed by three armed policemen yesterday afternoon. Not out to staunch the free flow of our information, they were in fact just looking for plain white paper. A Commonwealth Foundation staff member got such a fright at this infringement of the freedom of association, she took to her heels.

But the gauche policemen hadn't banked on the Peoples Forum chair, Nkoyo Toyo, being in the room with her own lieutenant. Before the men in green could say a word, the two were on to them. "Show some civility!" said one, shooing them out like school-boys. "Barging in here with guns – why can't one come in," said Toyo bundling them out and shutting the door. "Please don't be annoyed," said the lead policeman, looking very sheepish. How things have changed in Nigeria since the Abacha days!

It is not pleasant to look around and see menacing black police vans saying 'Operation fire for fire'. No doubt that is how security forces work around the world. But to say it sounds too much like "an eye for an eye..." We are all like that, but can we have some hypocrisy here?