

## **2004 Convention - Washington DC**

It was at the Toronto gathering in July 2003, that conventioners decided to form different chapters and make conventions an annual event. The Washington D.C convention, which took place July 1-4, 2004, at the exquisite Mayflower Hotel in downtown Washington DC, had its genesis from the events in Toronto.

The Washington DC convention, which drew a sizeable crowd of over 170 delegates, vis-à-vis Toronto's 74, benefited from the success achieved in Toronto, where ICOB had earlier distinguished itself as a non-partisan organization of well-accomplished professionals held together by a common bond of cultural and developmental issues, despite many attempts by detractors to campaign against it as a front for Ugandan opposition politicians. The Toronto convention had also been victim to the negative effects emanating from the SARS epidemic centered on the city of Toronto, which was affecting tourism to the city in general.

The USA chapter of ICOB which is headquartered in the nation's capital of Washington DC, organized a spectacular convention at the historic Mayflower Hotel, just a few blocks from the White House. The period of the convention, stretching from July 1st to 4th, also coincided with the nation's independence day, and traditionally, America's most celebrated holiday.

As such, first time visitors to the US, and to Washington DC in particular, were treated to a 2-for-the-price-of-one bargain, attending the ICOB convention, and sampling American style independence celebrations.

Delegates, especially those from outside Washington, started arriving and checking into the hotel on Thursday evening. A few members of our Washington Chapter were on hand to receive and give them the information kits for the convention. No major activity had been scheduled for this day.

### **Exploring business opportunities:**

Friday was the first day everyone rolled up his or her sleeves. The welcoming committee began by checking the delegates into the conference room, ensuring that all registered attendants had the information they needed.

The official opening was marked by singing the two national anthems, one for the United States as host country, followed by the Ugandan one.

In his welcoming remarks to the delegates, the President of the Washington DC Chapter, Dr. Frank Byamugisha, highlighted the theme of the convention as that of formally launching ICOB, and the Kigezi Education Fund tailored towards the improvement of education in our motherland.

This was followed by a brief synopsis on the evolution of ICOB by Dr. Muniini K. Mulera, a founding member, and President of the Canadian chapter of ICOB.

The day had been dedicated as one for building business partnerships, so, it was most appropriate that the keynote speaker for the occasion was someone representing the business constituency. Mr. Moses Ssebunya, the Vice-Chairman of Uganda Investment Authority, who ably played this role, elaborated on the steps the Uganda government had taken in the last decade to create an environment favorable to business.

The morning session was devoted to learning from the experiences of delegates, both from Uganda, and those in the diaspora, with hands-on experience in the business world, which might be of relevance to Uganda.

Among the projects presented that morning, were a low-budget solar power project that is currently running in many parts of Uganda. Others touched on the privatization of secondary and

university educational services, as exemplified by Kabojja Secondary School, and Kigezi International School of Medicine, and the provision of professional services such as medical clinics and accounting services.

Delegates were treated to a working luncheon at the Mayflower hotel, which allowed those people who had picked up some interest in particular projects to continue the discussions that had been stimulated by the topics.

The afternoon session was devoted to Power point presentations of carefully selected business topics. Among the topics presented were, Tourism, Horticulture & Agro-business processing, Mining, and Micro Finance. Kigezi presents unique opportunities in the fields of tourism and agriculture. It is the only region of the country that is home to the world-famous mountain gorillas, and offers a temperate climate that can allow the production of exotic fruits and vegetables for the lucrative markets in developed countries. The session ended with an Action plan and a timetable being drawn, spelling out the timeline in which some tangible results should be expected.

The presenters did a good job of articulating the roles the government and private sector could play in stimulating growth, and attracting investment into these sectors. The details of the presentations, including authors, and the subsequent Action Plan.

### **Working Sessions:**

Saturday's session began with a hearty breakfast at the Mayflower, served within the conference room in which the meetings were held.

The sessions on Saturday were meant to capture and highlight some of the unique positions occupied by ICOB delegates in the

diaspora. These include, inter alia, their high earning potential, which allows them to use their savings to start business activities. At the same time, new immigrants face impediments with regard to their immigration status. It's no secret that most of the so-called "nkuba kyeyos" arrive in various countries with less than adequate legal documents to allow them to settle down and assimilate into the rest of society. Their shaky status does not allow them to fully exploit their potential in obtaining educational opportunities, a condition that ultimately keeps them at the low-end of the job scale.

Tied in with this, is the issue of extending dual citizenship, which has been a point of contention for many years, and still unresolved, despite many promises from the Ugandan government. A senior official of a key American NGO that handles immigrants on behalf of the US government was a guest speaker during this session.

Another of the issues discussed was how ICOB could align itself with organizations such as United Way, which already have the know-how and infrastructure to raise funds for worthy causes. A guest speaker from United Way addressed the delegates on the activities and modalities of forming linkages with his organization. This is the way to go, especially, with regard to fund-raising for the education fund.

The delegates also heard about education opportunities in the US from experienced professionals in the field. This session aimed at pointing out ways to exploit services such as college scholarships, of which new immigrants may not be aware.

Saturday evening was crowned with an all-inclusive Forum on Leadership and Development. This was an open session in which representatives of major political parties and groups in Uganda gave a brief presentation of their views on the forum's theme, followed by questions and comments from the audience. All gloves were off with respect to the nature of topics. There were no restrictions, except, by a gentlemen's agreement, in which the moderator had committed the speakers to refrain from using abusive language.

The biggest achievement during this session was the cordiality with which some erstwhile sworn enemies were able to sit and discuss contentious topics, without reaching for each other's throats.

## **Cultural extravaganza:**

No convention would be considered a success without immersing the delegates into a cultural rendezvous. Efforts were not spared in making sure that the Washington convention would leave a lasting impression on those who attended it. Sunday morning was left open for delegates to catch up with the numerous tourist attractions that adorn the nation's capital.

Some organized tours to popular sites, such as the Air & Space Museum, Capitol Hill, the White House, and Arlington National Cemetery had been arranged, especially for families with children. Those who preferred to explore the city and its environs on their own, were also encouraged to do so, and provided with brochures relevant to their interests.

As the day for the grand finale was also America's birthday party, Washington was bustling with all nature of humanity in a celebratory mood. In the early stages of preparation for the Dinner/Dance, one of our fears had been that the attendance for the dinner would be undercut by the open-air fireworks displays that annually illuminate the Washington Mall area, attracting hundreds of thousands of spectators.

Fortunately for us, these fears proved unfounded, as we opened the gates to the gala room at the Mayflower. First, the children stole the show with their cultural sophistication, singing, and reciting poems in the Rukiga language, even though, most of them have been born and bred outside Kigezi, with the majority never having set foot there.

The delegates, together with the many guests who had responded to this worthy cause were soon invited to whet their appetites on a sumptuous buffet-style dinner, punctuated by cultural dancing in which every able-bodied soul was invited to participate.

Dinner was immediately followed by a raffle draw whose purpose was to further boost the purse of the Kigezi Education Fund. Then, as the evening wore on, the new President of ICOB, Dr. Frank Byamugisha, was invited to formally launch ICOB, which he did with a lot of fanfare, to great cheers from the audience.

He began by emphasizing what he envisioned as the *raison d'etre* for convening the ICOB delegates to the symbolic city of Washington DC, one often referred to as the most important city in the most important country in the world. Next, followed the launching of the Kigezi Education Fund, whose objective is to

promote and support technical and vocational education.

He rounded this up by announcing the names of individuals and corporations who had kick-started the fund with their generous donations. ICOB has singled out this fund as its cause celebre, around which to rally the troops for a worthy cause.

Finally, it was time for all and sundry, wazeei and watoto alike, to loosen up, and shake their bodies to the intoxicating rhythms of DJ Mondi's soukous collection.

Monday morning was a time for farewells, amidst yawning faces, whose expressions clearly betrayed the owners' lack of sleep. Everyone parted company, duly convinced, that the convention time had been well spent, and looked forward to the next one in London, where, inshallah, we hope to build on the solid foundation already on the ground.