

350 AT ASIA PLATEAU CONFERENCE

'Happy New Year', Aung San Suu Kyi wrote across the bottom of her 1000-word keynote message to the international conference at Asia Plateau, at the start of India's 50th year of Independence. Affirming that 'there can be no real freedom unless the mind and spirit are free', Suu Kyi addressed India's youth, saying that they had a more difficult task than the fight against colonialism, a task which required them to 'constantly reassess the values of their own society as well as their own motives.'

Suu Kyi would have been moved – as many of us were – as hundreds of children from 16 nearby village schools recited a pledge at the opening ceremony on the tableland above the MRA Centre. 'It is time now for every Indian to become free – free of bitterness and indifference...', it began. Dressed in bright turbans, saris or school uniforms, the schoolchildren danced and sang of their love of India for the 350 conference delegates and many from Panchgani town.

Detailed reports will appear in newsletters, but among the significant developments at the conference, 'Learning from the 20th century, preparing for the 21st', were:

1. It was rooted in India's soil. Many local Maharashtrians participated. A group of villagers presented an evening of rich culture and spiritual depth. A member of the Panchgani Youth Forum commented that the conference had 'started a dialogue between Panchgani town and the Asia Plateau centre which must continue'.
2. Organising the conference with us were outstanding young people from the Association of Youth for a Better India, and 34 from previous MRA youth camps who came weeks before to prepare. Besides hard work, their passion and commitment brought inspiration to the sessions. Many of them already serve in projects for social improvement.
3. Matching their enthusiasm and vigour were people in business and industry who are working to establish a new industrial culture adequate for India's increasingly free market economy. One expressed

the challenge as 'economic enrichment without spiritual impoverishment'.

4. One third of the programme was devoted to an Open Space process, conducted by professional consultants. This enabled a huge range of delegates' concerns to be discussed in groups, and moved them from analysis to lines of action. Networks formed to grapple with environment and waste management, purifying drinking water, the non-violent struggle against corruption, an agenda for educational reform, ethics in health care, and creating bridges between India and Pakistan (now being coordinated by a young

man who, at the beginning, argued that such links were impossible).

5. One group expressed keenness to launch an ethical, conscience magazine in the style of the former *Himmat* magazine, and made immediate plans for a feasibility study.

6. Significant dialogues took place with some of India's minorities, including the Jarkhand in Bihar, and the Bodo in the North-East – both situations of great tension. There was a frank exchange on the Hindu-Muslim issue.

7. Winner of the Magsaysay Award, Delhi's former Inspector-General of Police, Ms Kiran Bedi, gave a visionary closing address.

8. Participants came from 18 nations – including Dato Paduka Saleha from Malaysia, Son Soubert from Cambodia and Rabbi Marc Gopin from the USA – marking a new level of international interaction.

9. Former colleagues and friends – some who had helped establish Asia Plateau – came with their families. Some had not been for years; but their tried and tested experience of living out their convictions contributed much.

We thank God for a sense of inspired intervention and the promise of a wider, maturer team to respond to the needs of this region.

R D Mathur Mike Brown

Some further thoughts from Aung San Suu Kyi's message to the conference:

Freedom means choice. We can either choose to gratify narrow, selfish interests or to expand our hearts and minds to encompass the needs and aspirations of others. The 21st Century could offer exceptional opportunities for creating an environment that provides greater security and happiness for all peoples. It could also be an era when gross materialism is let loose to trample afoot the forces of justice and compassion.

There are enduring values that transcend national borders and centuries. There are also values that have to be discovered for our own times. The process of discovering is a challenge to young people who wish to mould the world into a pattern that reflects the morning freshness of their lives. I would like to urge them to seize this opportunity with gratitude and enthusiasm: missed opportunities could set back individuals and nations by decades.

TWENTY COUNTRIES IN PRAGUE

Sixty young people (plus 5 or 6 older!) spent New Year together in Prague; over 150 had applied for the places available. We came from 20 countries, of which 11 were Central and East European. The gathering also served as a *Foundations for Freedom* regional meeting. Four travelled from Russian Siberia, and others came from the Balkans and Baltics. Temperatures around minus 20 centigrade did not cool the warm atmosphere as we discussed 'What makes friendship real?' Sharing reached deep levels as we talked about relationships in the family, between individuals, in the community and between nations. New Year was celebrated in style looking out over Prague's fireworks-lit skyline.

'As I danced a Scottish reel with a Russian on one arm and a German on the other,' said a Czech, 'it struck me that my grandparents wouldn't have been able to do this.' Another participant said, 'The gathering helped me see what to do to help in my family situation, where there have been crises.'

There was enthusiastic support for another regional gathering next New Year in central Europe.

Edward Peters

WINTER CONFERENCE CLIMAX TO YEAR

A New Year conference brought 200 people to Caux. It took the theme of the Jubilee summer, 'Healing the Past, Forging the Future', and focused on the place where so many of these issues begin: the family. The programme was prepared by a number of Dutch families, and 75 Dutch took part in the conference, 32 of them under 18. They had chosen thought-provoking, sometimes provocative, themes – What standards do both young and old consider important? What is the role of quiet in discovering guidance, wisdom and perception? Can quiet be dangerous? Is forgiveness rational or emotional? Does marriage mean constantly compromising one's values?

We all worked at the discussions. They were not occasions when children were neatly removed to a programme of their own, so that parents could talk about them. In our group we had fascinating interchanges, so much so that we almost forgot lunch, continued the discussion as we prepared the next meal together, and took up the subject again next morning.

Caux was a fairy-tale land of hoarfrost and powdery snow, and there was plenty of sleighing and skiing. In the workshops there was painting and drawing, pantomime and dance, music and singing. Many of the themes were expressed through plays and sketches, and it was amazing to see the quality of acting of both old and young.

'I never imagined that a New Year celebration with people of every generation, and without alcohol or overeating, could be such enormous fun,' said the father of four small children.

Marianne Spreng

KHMER ROUGE DEFECTOR RECOMMENDS VIDEO

Last September a Khmer Rouge division defected to the Royal Cambodian Army. Its Deputy Commander, Keo Chhieng, spoke after seeing the video *The Serene Life* at the 'third national seminar on Buddhism and the development of Khmer society' sponsored by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation (KAF).

'What I have seen here I will take back to my camp,' he said. 'Maha Ghosananda's life is a good example – we should study this film.' 300 monks, nuns and lay people from 15 of Cambodia's 21 provinces watched the film. Copies of this film and of *The Serene Smile* were presented to Keo Chhieng by Maha Ghosananda.

A declaration of commitment to work for peace through Buddhist values was signed by the Interior Minister, a former Khmer Rouge commander, the Governor of the province, a senior monk and nun and a Cambodian NGO representative. At a camp near Batambang, KAF representative, Peter Schier, and David Channer addressed 80 former Khmer Rouge soldiers.

Alan Channer

BELARUS MEETING

At the beginning of December people came from Poland, Russia and Belarus itself to a weekend conference in Minsk. Our aim was to see how MRA can influence moral development in this part of Europe. One idea discussed was of an MRA conference in July this year, on a riverboat sailing through Russia. This could be an opportunity for people from the ex-communist countries to meet, and discuss common problems in order to develop a common solution, honestly before God.

*Vladimir Romanovsky Wanda Tarnawska
Mihail Bilinkis*

INTERNATIONAL COORDINATION GROUP MEETS

The International Coordination Group (Annejet Campbell, Amina Dikedi, Elsa Vogel, Bryan Hamlin, Suresh Khatri, Philippe Lasserre, Jens Wilhelmsen) were privileged to be invited to India, and take part in the inspiring New Year Conference at Asia Plateau.

We were nourished by the depth and reality of India's spiritual heritage, challenged by the passion of its youth, given hope by the evidence of its industry meeting the needs of people and enriched by the vision and commitment of so many to build a new India together.

India focused again for us the core of our message: lives wholly given to God; transparent relationships; world responsibility. We held our 'mid-year' meeting in the beautiful surroundings of Asia Plateau, and reviewed the issues that are concerning us. We are

being made increasingly aware that the way we run our centres and programmes, and the situation of full time workers, are all going through change. If we want to see MRA progress in its many and varied outreaches, we feel the need for us all to pay attention to ways in which work traditionally accomplished by full-time workers could be done: by people between jobs taking six months or a year; by people retiring early; by friends, full-time or not, hosting centres by rotation; by young people taking a year or two as co-workers.

We also feel that we should increase the flow between countries by encouraging those who can spend time beyond their own borders. Such people can contribute much at Asia Plateau, where the needs are great; at Caux each summer; and also in those countries which have had few visitors from abroad in recent years.

Some of these issues will be addressed at the April Consultation in Australia, where Suresh will represent the Co-ordination Group. After our time in India, Amina is going to East Africa while Jens and Suresh will visit Japan. We remain open to any request from any of you. All of us will be present at Caux during the month of August 1997. CG Secretary: Philippe Lasserre, 22, avenue Robert Schuman, F 92100 Boulogne-Billancourt. Fax: +33 1 41 10 80 67. E-mail: 100745.1622@compuserve.com (att. P Lasserre).

AGENDA FOR RECONCILIATION

An attractive 28-page report of the Agenda for Reconciliation Symposium at Caux last August is now available. In word and photo, it captures this extraordinary event, covering the sessions on France and Germany – the Paradigm Experience; Post Cold War Europe; The African Experience; Japan and the International Community; Across Boundaries of Religious Cultures; Hope in the Cities.

The report should assist in inviting people to this year's Caux conference, particularly the session, 'Healing the past, forging the future – Dialogues towards justice and reconciliation' (August 14-20). It can also give people in leadership a grasp of the moral and spiritual essentials in reconciliation and of MRA's work in this area.

The Japan Foundation has generously covered the report's production costs. It is now being despatched to different countries. If you still wish to place an order you may do so with Campbell Leggat in London. For large quantities, airfreight or postage will be charged.

Brian Lightowler

BUILDING COMMUNITY IN MINNESOTA

'Beyond boundaries: choices for community' will be the theme of a conference at the University of Minnesota, June 24-29, which has the Mississippi

River, one of the great natural boundaries of the United States, as its backdrop.

The task of the conference is to identify creative means of building community that transcend the boundaries of age, race, gender, creed, class and ideology. An initiative of the Americas, it will focus on community and its many aspects. Potential topics range from the definition and importance of community to the tools needed to build it. The conference programme is designed to energise people to positive action. Our hope is to create an understanding of the need for community by generating a spirit of true community during the conference. Tentative plans are being made for a 'walk-through history' on a riverboat cruising the Mississippi.

Many from the US, Canada and Latin America are collaborating on this effort. All ideas are welcome; please contact:

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Greg Robertson (MRA intern, Washington)

PLANNING MEETING FOR CAUX

There is to be a planning meeting in London February 7-10 for those working on the conference session August 5-12 in Caux entitled 'Creativity, Freedom, Service ...' All ideas welcome. If you can come yourself, better still! Contact Hugh Williams in London or Gunnar Söderlund in Stockholm.

It is becoming clear that this proposed week in Caux is attracting young people and working artists in particular. Few in either category have much money and we shall need a fund to help them participate. Contributions can be sent to us in London or Stockholm or direct to Caux.

Hugh Williams

INTER-FAITH SENSITIVITY

Several people have responded to Suresh Khatri's piece in the December WB. We have space to print only one. A number of people feel that Suresh has raised a vital issue. If you would like to read all the responses, we will gladly send them. – The Editors

I am sad about the insensitiveness towards other faiths that Suresh writes about. I fear it is often something worse, it is ignorance of the depth and teaching at the heart of other religions. Absolute truth, absolute moral standards, are part of the character and nature of God, part of the truth of the ages that arch and uphold the universe. In fact, they are laws of nature or 'natural' law. That is why all the great religions endorse them and seek to interpret them.

At the heart of Christianity is the belief that Christ came to transform our human nature which so often seems to prefer sin to God's ways. In this age of 'pick and mix' religion, unfortunately Christians need to be reminded that absolute moral standards are indeed Christian standards.

'From the cowardice that dare not face new truth;
From the laziness that is contented with half truth;
From the arrogance that thinks it knows all truth;
Good Lord, deliver us.' A prayer from Kenya.

Juliet Boobbyer

FACTS ON FAXES, PHONES AND ADDRESSES

Finland: Paula Snellman (and Oliver, six years) are now at: Hiihtäjätie 6 A 22, 00810 Helsinki 81, Tel: +358 9 727 6637, where they moved a few months before Pauli's death last November.

Marketta Waroma: Lddkdrinkatu 4 A 15, FIN-00250 Helsinki. Tel +358 9 2417035.

Paul Gundersen's fax address: c/o Jorma Koponen: +358 9 2756024 (from Scandinavia, more practical and faster by ordinary post).

New e-mail addresses: Hannu and Terttu Laaksonen: Hannu.Laaksonen@tlaakso.pp.fi

Jorma Koponen: Jorkkiko@freenet.hut.fi

New Zealand: Rob and Sue Sinclair have moved to a new address: PO Box 5559, Papanui, Christchurch.

E-mail: rsinclair@xtra.co.nz

Australia: Please note that John and Helen Mills' fax number is +61 8 8379 3926.

From January 29, until further notice, Peter and Rosemary Thwaites will be at: 9 Morpeth Mansions, Morpeth Terrace, London SW1P 1ER, UK .

Tel: +44 171 828 8331

Sweden: MRA in Stockholm now has an e-mail address: mra_sth@algonet.se

Calendar of Events

JAN '97	<u>Asia Plateau India</u>	Learning from the 20th Century, preparing for the 21st	Jan 3 - 7
	<u>Fitzroy Falls NSW Australia</u>	Teenage camp: 'Signposts for the Future'	Jan 11 - 17
	<u>Petropolis Brazil</u>	'Encuentro de las Americas'	Jan 30 - Feb 2
FEB '97	<u>London, Britain</u>	Planning for Caux session 'Creativity, Freedom, Service'	Feb 7 - 10
	<u>Armagh Melbourne Australia</u>	'Life Matters', nine-day course for young adults	Feb 7 - 16
	<u>Britain</u>	'Making Democracy Work', 12-day prog. for young Ukrainian MPs	Feb 21 - Mar 3
MAR '97	<u>Crimea Ukraine</u>	FFF Visiting Course	Mar 3 - 15
	<u>Sydney Australia</u>	International Communications Forum	Mar 15 - 16
	<u>Tirley Garth Britain</u>	FFF Students Initiative Course	Mar 16 - 22
APR '97	<u>Kano Nigeria</u>	Conference: Africa - pattern of peace and unity	Apr 19 - 25
	<u>Victoria Australia</u>	Global Consultation on enlistment and training	Apr 19 - 26
MAY '97	<u>Boulogne Paris, France</u>	Preparation for Caux 1997	May 8 - 11
	<u>Moldova</u>	'The Search for Freedom', FFF Seminar	May 23 - 25
JUN '97	<u>Minneapolis USA</u>	International Conference at University of Minnesota	Jun 24 - 29
JUL '97	<u>Caux Switzerland</u>	The World of Tomorrow - A Dynamic Learning Community	Jul 12 - Aug 24
SEP '97	<u>Tirley Garth Britain</u>	FFF International Course	Sep 4 - 23

The deadline for the next Bulletin is Saturday, February 15, 1997

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