

July 21, 2005

Condoleeza Rice Comes to Town

We've had pretty fair weather for the past few days: not too hot, the occasional sprinkle, rain clouds threatening in the late afternoon.

The Embassy was a madhouse these past few weeks. It all had to do with the upcoming AGOA Conference, which took place this week. AGOA: African Growth and Opportunity Act represents the U.S.'s commitment to assist African countries to expand their exports to America. This is the third AGOA Conference since 1999. At least 18 countries were represented.

Our Secretary of State flew to Dakar Tuesday, stayed overnight at the Meridien Hotel and presided over the final meetings. The Embassy closed at 10:30 AM Wednesday so that all employees would participate in a "Meet and Greet" with Condoleeza Rice at the Hotel. Dieynaba, my work colleague and I drove in my car out to USAID, stopping on the way to pick up Dieynaba's daughter, Claire, who sported a snazzy red, white & blue ensemble.

USAID was one of three assembly points where employees and family members gathered to take a bus to the hotel. We arrived at the hotel more than one hour before the scheduled "Meet & Greet". We were ushered to a large ballroom where we all stood around schmoozing. Ambassador Richard Roth and his lovely wife, Carol, arrived. This Conference is their swan song. They are scheduled to depart post on August 5. They will be sorely missed.

At the appointed hour the ballroom was "locked down" – nobody allowed either in or out. The Ambassador and his wife ushered the Secretary into the room and to the rostrum surrounded by a phalanx of security men. One Senegalese photographer had the misfortune to be in the way of this "flying wedge". The first security man blocked him like a pro-footballer back, back, back and into the crowd.

Ambassador Roth introduced the Secretary, and she stepped to the podium. Ms. Rice is less attractive than she is intelligent-looking. She's slim almost to the point of anorexia. (Gossip has it that she asked the hotel to move a treadmill from the Health Club up to her room the night before.) Her hair looks like it hasn't moved in five years – designed to withstand a Class 5 hurricane.

She possesses a wonderfully comfortable speaking voice. My co-worker, Toure, he with two wives, exclaimed that he loved her voice. He just wanted to speak with her for two minutes, and then ask her to be his third wife.

She praised the work of the FSN's (Foreign Service Nationals) "without whom our offices could not function." She praised the Ambassador and his wife for heir

outstanding job at this post. She spoke of her last visit to Senegal when she and President Bush visited Goree Island. "I wondered how many of my ancestors had passed through the 'Door of No Return' as slaves." She also mentioned the agreement that was signed by Senegal and the U.S. under which the U.S. proposes to supply technical expertise to the country on the manufacture and export of products, the promotion of private commercial investment and inter-African commerce.

The agreement is valued at \$200 million. This on top of the U.S. forgiveness of \$3 billion debt keeps America in high regard here.

After her brief talk she mingled with the crowd, shaking hands and exchanging remarks. Yes, I shook her hand. Funny, I wasn't moved to shake President Bush's hand when I had the chance here two years ago.

A la prochaine,

Chuck