INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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U.S. Embassy
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At the Center of West Africa

Mr. Peter Bird Martin
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Dear Peter,

Ouagadougou is a city of 150,000 people and half a million two-wheeled vehicles. Never have I seen so many bicycles, motorbikes and motorcycles. The streets around the central marketplace are lined with rows and rows of bikes and mobylettes (French motorbikes), uniformly blue, for sale and for rent. The whine of small engines drowns out other city noises as the Ouagadougouans scoot about, their cycle clusters sometimes reaching six abreast in a seemingly unending file on the streets, outnumbering not only the cars but the pedestrians. The sight of so many people perched on little seats dignifiedly going about their business brought images of southeast Asia to my mind, but Ouagadougou is the capital of Upper Volta, one of Africa's—and of the world's—poorest countries.

Inside the layers of cycles surrounding the market, beyond the mechanics' sheds and spare-part shops, the scene changes from that of a bustling, if not thriving, modern city to a souk, an Arab marketplace. After feeling as though I had been transported in space to Thailand or Vietnam, I began to imagine I had gone back in time to the days when camel caravans crossed the Sahara from Fez and Tripoli to Awdaghost and Timbuctu. Control of the commerce between the North African states on the Mediterranean and the forest kingdoms on West Africa's southern coast created great empires in the savannah belt beneath the desert from the ninth to the nineteenth century. Gold, ivory and slaves no longer pass this way, but some of the goods in the Ouagadougou market show traces of the flux of that ancient trade.

The market is a maze of rows of open stalls, arranged in blocks set at right angles, grouped by the wares they sell like an open-air department store of competing salesmen. In the fabric section, colorful prints offer hundreds of different designs—pictures of famous people, from politicians to rock stars; abstracts of animals and plants; geometric designs. Most of the prints come from Europe, but some are made in Ghana and the Ivory Coast. Hanging next to them along the sides of the stalls are coarse but expertly woven cotton cloths of local manufacture, done by hand on wooden looms of a design that is probably thousands of years old. On the ground stand rolls of

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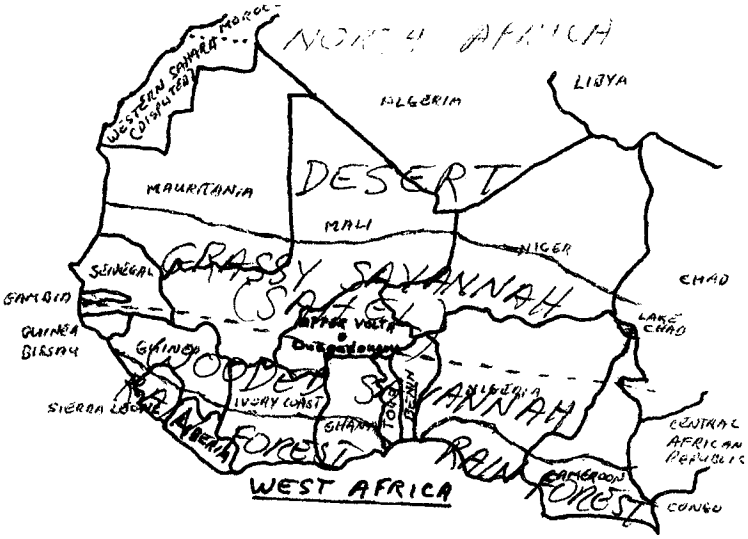

solid-colored, diaphanous materials, popular with the Muslim women of the savannah and the desert. Other stalls have mats spread with beads of stone, glass and plastic in all shapes, sizes and colors, cowrie shells, tacky costume jewelry from the West and other items of personal adornment. Works of leather, wood, brass and other metals line tables and shelves and hang from rafters. Most of the craftsmanship is shoddy, done for the undiscriminating tourist, but they add to the spirit of foreign places, different customs, strange gods.

The people, too, show this diversity. Lean, hawk-featured men in loose, white robes and turbans stride through the crowded market as purposefully and as oblivious of their surroundings as if they were walking across the Sahara, intent upon reaching the next oasis. In stark contrast are the women covered from head to foot in folds of black, even their faces hidden behind black veils, a sign of a stricter brand of Islam than I have encountered before in West Africa. Other women, less encumbered by their Muslim faith, wear chains of silver coins in their elaborate hairdos. Called Fulas or Peulhs to the west, Fulanis to the east, they are savannah nomads, found with their men and their cattle from Senegal to Cameroon. The southern people, men and women, show signs of a different kind of social harshness. Their faces and bodies are scarred in a network of light lines, in rows of deep incisions, or in intricate patterns of raised welts that may result from ash rubbed in the wound or from the insertion of small pebbles in the cuts.

Language also reveals Upper Volta as a crossroads of east and west, north and south. At times I was hailed as "toubab", the same word for white man used in Senegal, and which I hear often around my home in Abidjan. I attribute its spread here to the Dyulas, one of the Mande-speaking peoples of the west and south of West Africa. More often, especially in the Ouagadougou market, I was called "nasara", an Afro-Arabic word meaning Nazarene or Christian. I last encountered it in Chad, to the east. The market was indeed a melting pot. A look at the map shows that Upper Volta is in the center of West Africa, with Ouagadougou at the focal point. Standing in the middle of the central market, I felt that all of West Africa swirled around me.

Upper Volta, dependent on agriculture and livestock for 90 percent of its exports, has felt the full impact of the Sahelian drought that, with varying degrees of severity, has parched this land for more than a decade. In 1978, agricultural production was 8 percent below the level of 1973 and 27 percent below its 1970 level. The cattle population in 1978 was 28 per-

cent below the 1973 level and 45 percent below that of 1970. Gross national product per capita in 1978 was $130, putting the country near the bottom of the World Bank's list of the 25 poorest nations.

The drought increased the flight of young men to the Ivory Coast, where since colonial times the Voltaics have found jobs as unskilled laborers in agricultural areas as well as in Abidjan, the capital. The Ivory Coast owes much of its prosperity to these hard-working, low-paid Voltaics. Their migration has been a factor in the development of both countries, yet neither has come to terms with it. Although the Ivory Coast is still short of labor for its cocoa, coffee and other agricultural plantations, in Abidjan the government is waging a campaign against foreigners (of whom the Voltaics form the largest group) as the cause of an increase in crime in the capital. As for Upper Volta, remittances from the migrant laborers constitute about 8 percent of the country's gross domestic product, yet a previous government tried to extract direct payments from the Ivorian authorities for each job-seeker crossing the border. The present military government recently halted emigration in response to the Ivory Coast's growing xenophobia.

Last year West African countries made much of an agreement lifting restrictions on movements across national borders in the region, but, as is often the case here, the political pronouncements bear little resemblance to reality. The inability of the Voltaic and Ivorian governments to reach an accord on migration is incomprehensible considering the magnitude of the population shift between the two countries. The Ivorian government won't release statistics on the number of foreigners in the country, but a figure of 1.5 million Voltaics is widely accepted. That is about 23 percent of the population of Upper Volta (6.5 million) and almost 19 percent of the Ivory Coast's 8 million inhabitants. Migrants from other countries bring the percentage of foreigners in the Ivory Coast to more than a third of the population. Many of the migrants have spent most of their lives here. Voltaic men bring their families so their children can benefit from the Ivory Coast's lavishly funded education system. (In 1973 the Ivory Coast spent almost a third of its budget on education, the highest percentage expenditure of any country in the world, according to the World Bank.) Children are born here, grow up here and may spend their lives here, yet they are still considered aliens. Naturalization is unheard of, as is true throughout West Africa. Governments are not completely at fault. Some years ago, Ivory Coast President Felix Houphouet-Boigny proposed offering the Voltaic immigrants dual citizenship. The Ivorians rejected the idea, one of the few times they have not obeyed their leader's wishes.

Although 1973 was the worst year of the drought, conditions worsened for several more years. Farm productivity continued to fall as women and children took the place in the fields of the young men seeking work to the south. When the migrants took their families with them, their land was taken by countrymen from further north, whose cultivation techniques were not adapted to the more fertile soil. The drought led to changes in living habits. People ate more meat to make up for the lack of grain. The new diet has put an additional strain on the livestock industry. Consumers in the coastal states turned to

European meat imports when the drought lowered production in the north, and Upper Volta herdsmen now face competition from Europe in their traditional markets.

Conditions in Upper Volta began to improve in 1977. In that year river blindness in the southern part of the country was brought under control. Until then, the most fertile and well-watered third of the country was the least densely populated because of the ravages of the disease. The government has undertaken a resettlement program to put more of the southern land into cultivation and to take some of the load off the overburdened north. With an increase in rainfall the last three years, cattle herds have grown by an average of 4 percent a year and overall production has been estimated to be growing at 3 percent annually.

Another economic problem the country faces is the restiveness of organized labor. Although salaried employes constitute only 2 percent of the labor force, their concentration in the cities, especially the capital, give them substantial political power. The inability of the previous government, which came to office in 1978 after a multi-party election, to control the unions led to a bloodless military coup in November. The new head of state, Col. Saye Zerbo, has dealt harshly with the unions, limiting free speech and jailing some teachers for political activity. Such behavior has led to foreign press coverage depicting Zerbo as a military strong man bent on repressive, dictatorial rule.

Rather than another Idi Amin, however, Zerbo may prove to be like his counterpart to the east, Lt. Col. Seyni Kountché of Niger. Kountché's similarly strict regime is popular at home and abroad because he has hit hard at corruption, laziness and ostentatious living by the country's civil servants, and has set a good example in his own lifestyle and work habits. He has been known to make surprise early-morning visits to ministries to see who is at their desks.

The key to the prospects of Upper Volta is whether the military runs an efficient government or merely replaces one set of corrupt officials with another. My impression was favorable. Despite a one to five a.m. curfew and the forced closure of bars during government office hours, the country didn't strike me as a police state. I ran into less red tape and more friendly men in uniform than in any other West African country I've visited. I was especially struck by the appearance of Col. Zerbo rushing around town in a small sedan with two military jeeps as an escort. Policemen cleared intersections for him, but no screaming motorcycles drove cars to the side of the road for miles in front of him, which is a general practice for West African leaders. Zerbo apparently doesn't feel the need for a flag-fluttering motorcade of Mercedes, modesty that befits a capital where most people ride around on two wheels. Modesty alone won't make Zerbo a good ruler, but it could help him keep Upper Volta pedaling up the road of development.

Regards,

Bowden

Bowden Quinn

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