

Wednesday May 28, 2014 at 5:00 p.m. / Le mercredi 28 mai 2014 à 17h00

(La réunion a eu lieu à l'Université Saint-Paul)

Guest Speaker: Dr. Robert Ame, Associate Professor, Wilfrid Laurier U.

Agenda items

1. Welcome by the Chair / Mot de bienvenue de la Présidente

Ross Hynes was introduced as a new participant.

Brief bio note: Ross Hynes (LLB, University of Toronto, 1975; MPA, Queen's University, 1980) joined External Affairs in 1976. Postings abroad included Warsaw, Lagos and Canada's United Nations missions in Geneva and New York City, and Canadian representative to the UN Commission on Human Rights. He served more recently as high commissioner to Kenya, with concurrent accreditation to Uganda, Rwanda, Somalia, Burundi and Eritrea, and as permanent representative to the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements and to the United Nations Environment Program, in Nairobi; and subsequently from 2010 to 2013 as Canadian high commissioner to Pakistan. At HQ, Mr. Hynes has served as senior departmental assistant to the secretary of state for external affairs, departmental human rights coordinator and director of human rights, women's equality and justice affairs. He has also served as deputy executive director of the PCO Intelligence Assessment Secretariat, Canada's ambassador for mine action and director general of DFAIT's Stabilization and Reconstruction Task Force (START)..

Louise Ouimet a présenté un bref compte-rendu de sa visite au mois de mai 2014 au Burkina Faso et au Mali, deux pays où elle avait servi auparavant au sein du service diplomatique canadien en tant que chef de mission. A Ouagadougou, elle avait le sentiment que ce pays frôlait la crise. Le Président Blaise Compaoré qui dirige le pays depuis 1987, voulait encore prolonger son mandat, et tentait de monter un référendum afin de contourner la limite de 2015 fixée par la plus récente constitution. L'opposition dénonçait ses efforts, ce qui a donné lieu à des manifestations de rue. À Bamako, Mme Ouimet avait l'impression que le gouvernement du nouveau président 'IBK' semble tourner en rond, n'ayant rien fait jusqu'à présent pour faire avancer la réconciliation nationale. Kidal au nord reste aux mains du mouvement sécessionniste de l'Azawad. Cependant, l'opposition ne veut pas réallumer la guerre civile.

Régine Cirondeye qui est d'origine burundaise a sonné l'alarme d'une recrudescence des tensions ethniques entre Hutus et Tutsis dans son pays natal. Selon Régine, le Bureau des Nations-Unies à Bujumbura a transmis une communication à New York faisant état de la distribution des armes par le parti (Hutu) au pouvoir à ses jeunes militants afin que ceux-ci les utilisent contre la minorité Tutsi -- ce qui évoque la situation au Rwanda en 1994. Malgré le démenti du gouvernement burundais, et les démarches menées par les E-U pour calmer le jeu, les informations sont jugées crédibles. Pourtant, la communauté internationale ne semble pas prendre la situation très au sérieux. Régine veut que le danger soit reconnu et que des mesures soient prises pour appréhender le complot avant qu'il soit trop tard.

2. Dr. Robert Ame, "Assessing the Progress of Human Rights in Africa: Prospects and Challenges"/ "Bilan des progrès des droits de la personne en Afrique: Perspectives et défis"

Dr. Ame, a faculty member at Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo and former Director of the University's

Tshepo Institute for the Study of Contemporary Africa, chronicled the progress made by the Institute in becoming a university-wide multidisciplinary research centre for subject areas touching on Africa. It also has become a focal point of Africa-related activities for the entire Waterloo region. Dr. Ame said that his objective as director had been not knowledge for its own sake, but rather to apply the fruits of research to the problems of the African continent to bring hope to people.

Having focused his research on the implementation of human rights norms in non-western cultures, Dr. Ame drew a comparison between western and African concepts of human rights. In Africa, group rights are most important -- the extended family, respect for elders, négritude, ubuntu, ujamaa. He drew upon beliefs and practices in Ghana, his country of origin, where for example under the customary law of some ethnic groups a family has a right to decide whether a crime committed by a family member can be expiated by another member of the same family.

Dr. Ame said that the human rights model embedded in international conventions was largely driven by western concepts, and many African authorities viewed these concepts as not relevant to African experience. Nevertheless, many African states signed on to international agreements such as the Vienna Declaration and Program of Action adopted at the World Conference on Human Rights in June 1993 because of the link established between human rights and development. They accepted the Declaration nevertheless so that aid would flow. The same applied to the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which Ghana was the first country to ratify in 1990, even though the legal framework at the time in Ghana as well as the rudimentary institutional infrastructure did not allow for its immediate implementation. The Ghanaian approach has been to encourage progressive attainment of the CRC. For example, a ministry for women and children was established, a juvenile justice system is being created. However, a key issue continues to be the lack of resources to implement such measures.

Dr. Ame acknowledged that Africa can't remain isolated. African concepts of human rights and in particular the mainstream concept of collective rights are not static. As a result of western influences, African societies are increasingly accepting of international norms. However, Dr. Ame as well as a number of other participants maintained that there are many good features including principles of restorative justice which other societies might well consider borrowing from Africa.

3. Upcoming ASG Events -- Les prochaines activités du GRA

Paul Hitschfeld updated participants on the forthcoming ASG barbecue, which he and a cohort of volunteers were organizing. It will take place on Wednesday June 18 from 4:30 p.m., hosted by Ron and Eleanor Rose at their home across from Saint Paul University. Paul said that the cost to defray food and drink expenses would be \$12 per person, and that in the event of rain the BBQ would be postponed to the following day.