

SPEECH BY DR. KENNETH S. OMBONGI, PRINCIPAL, KENYA UTALII COLLEGE, ON THE OCCASION OF THE COLLEGE'S 34TH GRADUATION CEREMONY HELD ON TUESDAY, 13TH OCTOBER 2009

- Hon. Najib Balala, Our Guest of Honour, Minister for Tourism;
- Hon. Cecily Mbarire, Assistant Minister for Tourism;
- Madam Eunice Miima, Acting Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Tourism;
- Your Excellencies, the Ambassadors, High Commissioners and other Members of the Diplomatic Corps present here;
- Mr. Basil Tangai Ngoma, Chairman of the Board of Governors, Kenya Utalii College;
- Members of the Board of Governors present this morning;
- Chairmen and Chief Executives of various state corporations here today;
- Members from the hospitality and tourism industry;
- Parents, guardians and sponsors;
- Graduating students;
- Our general student community and their leadership;
- Distinguished guests;
- Ladies and gentlemen:

I extend to you all a very warm welcome to Kenya Utalii College. Karibu; karibuni sana. If we were in Kisumu, I will say *machiegni*; if we were in Kiambu, I will say *nida munyita ugeni*; if we were somewhere in Eldoret, I will say *Itagat*; in Machakos, *wimuthokye*; if we go a bit international to Kigali, Rwanda, I will say *murakazaneza*; I can go on and on.

Our chief guest, Honorable Minister, we want to thank you so much for accepting our invitation to grace this function. *Waziri*, this is really quite a privilege and a great honour for us. It was only yesterday that you arrived back from a long and tiring international trip in your course of duty. Also, this is the third time, in less than two months, that you have come here presiding over functions. Sir, we want to thank you; we want to welcome you so much.

To our esteemed invited guests, parents, members and representatives of various hospitality and tourism organizations - KAHC, KATA and KATO, thank you for taking your time to come and share this special day with us.

Mheshimiwa Waziri, if you kindly allow me, I will make brief comments before I invite Chairman Ngoma to address us.

Today, 351 students are graduating from our full time courses. Earlier, in March this year, another batch of 146 students successfully completed training in Food and Beverage Service and Sales. This brings us to the total number of 497 students who will have graduated from Utalii College this year alone.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

It is important to report that the average examination pass rate for all the course groups this year was in the upwards of 95%. This sterling, excellent, performance was matched by an equally impressive results in cases where our students took international examinations.

The College offers courses in international air travel in which the students sit international examinations organised under the auspices of the International Air Travel Association (IATA).

Simply put, Honorable Minister, these young men, young women, have done their best; they have received the very best of training in hospitality and tourism which one can find anywhere else in the world. And from my interaction with them in the last 153 days I have been around, I can confirm, here and now, that they have not only high dreams and great hopes for the hospitality industry but also a flair for success, greater courage, and an unrelenting spirit of sacrifice for the sake of the general good of the industry in this country and beyond. They are, indeed, our best hope for the future.

It is no wonder, therefore, our guests that reports from our placement office, here in College, indicate that close to half the number of these graduands has secured employment in various establishments across the country and outside.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

Among those graduating today are international students; students from Uganda; students from Rwanda and even students from as far a field as Gambia, West Africa, the edges of the Atlantic Ocean.

All these international students go along way to prove, time and again, that Utalii College is a cultural kaleidoscope, a social mosaic, where young people meet, interact, train, and go not just to serve Africa but the greater world.

The presence of these students has really set us, in Utalii, free from the shackles of parochialism. In a sense, long before the dream of the United States of Africa has been realised, we, in Utalii, have proved, glaringly and eloquently, that we can make a mini united Africa here, here!

Honourable Minister:

As we work to develop Utalii College to face the 21st century challenges, problems, with 21st century solutions, we want to bank on the support of stakeholders from the hospitality and tourism sectors. Hoteliers, tour operators, airlines, and a host of so many other friends of Utalii College who have supported us, some who have faithfully paid their 2% training levy, and continue to be there for us.

We are all together in this business of making Utalii progress. Utalii exists because the industry exists; since the industry exists so does Utalii. That is, indeed, a relationship, a bond, that no hammer is strong to break. Thank you members of the industry for the so many prizes that so many of you have donated to so many of our outstanding students graduating today.

We will reciprocate your gesture of generosity by training, training to the highest standards, many of such young people as your establishments will require now and in time to come. Already, the College runs capacity building programmes in which it has continued to organise training sessions to enhance standards of service in the industry.

This year alone, we have, so far, trained a total of 1,463 industry employees mainly from the operation cadres under the refresher course series. In addition, 191 managers have undertaken various courses at the College under the management development programme.

Much more recently, and in a complete departure from the common practice, the College, in collaboration with the Pubs, Entertainment and Restaurant Association of Kenya (PERAK), organised a tailor-made training programme for 355 employees of the pubs, restaurants and entertainment establishments in Mombasa and Nairobi. This was in recognition of the reality that the landscape of the hospitality industry is changing, and changing rapidly. Our pubs, restaurants and entertainment establishments are becoming an important segment of the industry. Their staff, equally, need to be equipped with skills, the right attitude and mannerism in order for them to deliver quality service to their clientele.

Therefore, it is our hope, sincere hope indeed, that we would, as a College, continue to prove worthy of the sacrifices made by and support that we receive from the many players in the industry.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

We cannot forget to salute and specially mention our alumnae; those here today and those who couldn't be here because of the call of duty. These are the men and the women who have drunk from the very fountain of knowledge that Utalii has been over the years; and more importantly, these are the men and women who have kept the star of Utalii shining in their respective places of work.

You have been our ambassadors, and very good ones at that; you have brought honour to this College and we are very proud of you; you have not only created the way but also shown the way to our students who come out of this College annually. You have been heroes and herones of service and courtesy everywhere in the hospitality industry as well as the pillars on which Utalii's reputation thrives.

It is our hope, our strong belief, that you will continue lending a hand to our new graduates in your respective establishments in the highs and lows of their professional progress. We are sure you will stand for us, by us and with us for as many tomorrows as it will take to keep our star up, up and shinning.

Honourable Minister:

As we set ourselves squarely on the path of further progress of this College, from now onwards, we cannot be oblivious of the hardships and setbacks we will have to overcome. But, Sir, we know that as long as we keep going, we keep trying our best, as long as we invest our skills, collective energies, and live by the faith that there is always rich rewards for hard work, unity and commitment, we will keep developing as a College and get to the greatest heights of hospitality and tourism training.

Thus, as a people in this College we have learned to get up everyday and keep going, to do our very best even when we face challenges of the fast changing times; we are focused on the present and future and we collectively, as lecturers, as workers, believe that tomorrow is going to be better than the past. We have seen the future from a far and we want to get there.

Ladies and gentlemen:

As we seek to extend our training services and facilities beyond Nairobi, beyond here off Thika Road, we are much aware that the hindrances to our success in this direction have been greater, far stronger, than we have appreciated over the years.

For example, the first time the idea of starting a Kenya Utalii College Campus in the coast was mooted and discussed was in 1979. In 1979 I was a village boy, walking barefoot and only in Standard 4. Today, I'm here, an adult and the Principal of this College and we are still talking about starting a coast Campus.

As a historian, I have looked back, reflected on this challenge and, I think, I now understand the problem. We have worked so hard for so long to do big things – start a big campus, state of the art facility, in our 60 acre plot at Vipingo, Kilifi. In all these endeavours, we perhaps forgot that if we cannot do big things we can do small things in a big way; a way that, still, will bespeak of our history of being the best that we have always been and were meant to be as a College.

Therefore, Honourable Minister, we have decided now to begin small. Before this month is out, we will equip the 2 floors of the Southern House building, Moi Avenue, Mombasa, which we are in the process of procuring. Here, in this house, we will start Utalii College, Coast Campus, in a small way – with basic courses which are in demand and basic facilities we will establish.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

I'm not a prophet. But I look to the future and I'm able to see this small place growing by and by and some day it will become a formidable fountain of knowledge in the Coast, a region which accounts for 60% of tourism revenue in this country.

Therefore, for those many people who have been asking, over the years, how long shall we wait for Utalii College to come to the Coast? My simple, loud and clear answer to them is that not any longer; not any more; we have come! We have come!

In other aspects, as a trainer, Kenya Utalii College will strive to keep pace with the demands imposed by the ever-changing needs of our customers, the hotel industry and related sectors.

To this end, the College has identified various activities to guide us in consolidating our leading position in the field of hospitality training. Top among our priorities towards achieving this goal include:

- The upgrading of programmes to degree level
- Modernization of training facilities

Honourable Minister:

Our efforts to start our Mombasa Campus will be complimented by our determination to transit into a university shortly. We are doing this with a sense of urgency because this is, also, something that needed to be done not last year, not two years ago, but many years back.

Initially, we want to collaborate with the University of Nairobi to offer degree courses. All the legal issues in that direction have been dealt with and we have only remained with securing permission from the Commission for Higher Education to advertise the programmes and this is gonna happen in a few days. We are determined to make it in a few days really.

And now Hon. Minister, ladies and gentlemen, it is my pleasant duty, indeed a great honour, to invite the Chairman of our Board of Governors, Mr. Basil Tangai Ngoma, to address us.

Thank you; thank you very much indeed.