



Address by Ambassador Rebecca E. Gonzales
On the Occasion of the United States of America's
244th Independence Day
July 4, 2020

Before I begin, please allow me to pay my respects to:

- His Majesty King Letsie III
- The Right Honorable the Prime Minister
- Members of His Majesty's Cabinet
- Their Excellencies Heads of Diplomatic Mission and International Organizations
- The Basotho Nation
- My Fellow Americans in Lesotho
- Ladies and Gentlemen

For many reasons, July 4th is different this year. In the midst of the global COVID-19 pandemic, keeping people safe and healthy must be our top priority. Still I wish to take this opportunity to discuss the recent transition and reforms, issues of human rights and trafficking in persons, and of course, our strong collaboration in the health space, to include both the immediate concerns of COVID-19 and our shared goal of reaching HIV/AIDS epidemic control by the end of this year.

First, I want to reflect on recent events in the United States. The Fourth of July is a holiday that commemorates the signing of America's Declaration of Independence. In their declaration of 1776, America's forefathers stated, *"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."*

Yet not everyone was or has been included fully in that statement in our two hundred and forty-four years as a nation – not black Americans, indigenous, nor other people of color, women or other marginalized groups. Hearing those words and knowing how we have failed to live up to them is painful and disheartening. Of the many American values I strive to embody as the United States' Ambassador to this beautiful nation, honesty and openness are paramount. It would be impossible and contrary to those values for me not to share how deeply the past few weeks have impacted me, as an American, as a mother, and simply as a human being.

For far too long, for too many generations, many Black Americans have lived in a country that failed to support them at best and at worst, took their very lives. There are no words that can explain or soothe the harsh and horrifying fact that systemic inequality and racial injustice pervade American society. The United States is facing a long overdue reckoning of the distance between our ideals and our reality. What gives me hope is to see that Americans in all 50 states have demonstrated peacefully against racism, joined by supporters in more than 60 countries. Here in Lesotho, my team and I have been touched by expressions of support from so many who share our sorrow and outrage at the unacceptable violence that killed George Floyd and so many Black Americans. We thank you for standing with us, as we have significant and challenging work ahead of us to dismantle oppressive structures, combat racial bias, and rebuild our nation in a more just and equitable manner, so that we can continue to strive for a more perfect Union.

As your long-standing and most resolute partner, I would like to congratulate Lesotho on its recent peaceful leadership transition. This is a complicated endeavor under any circumstances, but considering the ongoing pandemic, Basotho should be proud of their country's achievement. I also commend all the branches of the security sector who maintained order while upholding their commitment to serve on behalf of their fellow citizens. It is absolutely essential that Lesotho's leaders at all levels stay focused on maintaining political stability, so that Basotho can rely on government services – especially during this challenging global health pandemic. Likewise, that stability is required in order to resume the reforms process that Basotho consider so vital to Lesotho's present and future.

Reforms are about working towards a better, more equitable future for all citizens – a critical goal around which both Basotho and Americans can rally. It is about ensuring that democratic institutions and legal frameworks are strong and functioning, and that due process is followed in all cases. Accountability is an essential component and requires strong institutions to carry out the functions of oversight on behalf of the public. In order for them to function and protect the progress made through the reforms process, Lesotho's institutions of accountability require sufficient resources and genuine independence to conduct their work.

The United States has long advocated for strong mechanisms of accountability for police and security forces – and we will continue to do so. I urge the Government of Lesotho to reinforce the Police Complaints Authority and other mechanisms of accountability for the security services. We do this not because our law enforcement bodies or systems are perfect. Rather we do this because our own long-standing struggle to ensure equality before the law has taught us that this struggle is fundamental and necessary to every democratic country.

We are pleased that the new government is committed to addressing cross-border crime and trafficking in persons, issues that directly threaten Basotho lives and livelihood and impact the United States' ability to provide assistance. In the most recent Trafficking in Persons report, Lesotho was downgraded to Tier 3. This is because the previous government did not investigate or prosecute any human trafficking cases for the second consecutive year, despite serious concerns of official complicity in trafficking crimes that I personally raised repeatedly with key leaders. This is not a decision taken lightly. However, my team and I are engaging with the relevant Ministries from the outset on how to move forward, including addressing human trafficking in the country's judicial framework.

The United States is eager to build even stronger businesses and investment ties with Lesotho through AGOA and our expanded Prosper Africa toolkit. As I said last year, when you think of AGOA or trade with the United States, I do not want people to think just Thetsane and textiles. I want you to think trout and technology, fruits and vegetables, handicrafts and flowers, and more. I want Americans to know and look for that "Made in Lesotho" label, so that Basotho innovation and creativity can be known across the globe. We can make that happen together, as we continue the capacity-building and support necessary to connect Basotho businesses with the U.S. market.

The United States is proud to continue its long tradition as the world leader in the provision of health and humanitarian assistance to our allies and friends around the world, including across Africa. Currently, we are investing our technical expertise and resources to help lead the global response to COVID-19. The United States contributed \$3.75 million (over 71 million Maloti) directly to help Lesotho prepare for and

address the COVID-19 outbreak through our trusted implementing partners and the Ministry of Health.

Last week, we delivered a donation 12,000 medical-grade masks, 11,000 face shields, and 256 thermometers procured by the U.S. military to help protect Lesotho's health workers. I personally accompanied the shipment, worth \$45,000 (over 777,000 Maloti) to the National Drug Service Organization warehouse in Mafeteng, from where the Ministry of Health will ensure the supplies are distributed equitably to areas of greatest need.

We are committed to donating high quality items. Any equipment we would not use in the United States, we will not donate in Lesotho. The delivery was delayed because we learned that one component might not quite meet the stringent requirements for medical-grade personal protective equipment, or PPE. The United States chose to re-test the material to ensure that we only delivered top quality items because we only provide the best equipment to Lesotho's front-line health workers.

These most recent efforts build upon our historic and ongoing commitments to Lesotho, where we have provided more than \$834 million (over 15.8 billion Maloti) in health assistance over the last twenty years. Together Americans and Basotho built the healthcare foundation in Lesotho in response to the HIV/AIDS pandemic. I am confident that this foundation and our ongoing partnership will continue to save Basotho lives and lessen the impact of the coronavirus outbreak.

Despite moving rapidly to access more resources and provide technical assistance on COVID-19, my team and I have not lost sight of the paramount goal of helping Lesotho reach HIV/AIDS epidemic control by the end of this year. Our focus is to continue to provide prevention, care, and treatment services and to strengthen health systems to reach this milestone.

Every Mosotho has a key role to play in helping Lesotho reach epidemic control which will result in considerably lower numbers of new infections. It means we will be able to identify people at risk and help them avoid infection. It means we will be able to keep people consistently on treatment so that their viral load is suppressed, and they are unlikely to transmit the virus to their partners. It means we can openly confront the stigma facing those who are HIV positive and combat the discrimination they face. It means Basotho can live and thrive with the health and well-being they deserve. Alongside many Basotho champions in this fight, the United States continues to push on toward this goal with urgency.

As we honor the Fourth of July this year, we are looking back at the first half of 2020 as one of the most challenging periods in our collective memory. But we cannot lose hope, there is also the chance to make 2020 a turning point toward a better world. Never have I been more confident that right now in 2020 it is important to show kindness and dignity to all people. Individual actions like washing hands, wearing masks, and practicing social distancing work to slow the spread of COVID-19. This clearly demonstrates that our concern and empathy for others can save lives. So can taking care to know your HIV status, protecting yourself and your loved ones, and getting on and adhering to treatment. The desire to make the world better for future generations unites people across our countries and the world, whether for the cause of dismantling racism, turning the tide against HIV/AIDS, or building stronger democracies through political reforms.

With that, I want to leave you with the final thought that has sustained me over the past few months – *Let'soele le beta poho*. United We Stand. Thank you, Lesotho, for standing by our side; we are honored to stand by yours. Kea leboha. Khotso, Pula, Nala.