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Press Releases & Speeches

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Launch of Preservation of the Khama Family and Bessie Head Paper Archives from Postcolonial Botswana

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It is an honor to be here in the historic town of Serowe. Yesterday, I had the pleasure of swearing in 72 new Peace Corps Volunteers who will work alongside Motswana counterparts in towns and villages throughout Botswana. I am extremely proud of our Peace Corps program, and of the 2,400 Americans who have served as volunteers in Botswana since 1966.

All of the 72 Peace Corps Volunteers that I swore in yesterday benefited from family stays in your community. This cultural exchange was designed to help get these Volunteers off to a good start in Botswana, to help them become effective leaders within the communities to which they were assigned. I think it is worth noting that my government sponsors a large number of exchange programs for Botswana as well. If you allow me a moment, there is one in particular that I want to highlight: the Young African Leaders Initiative, or YALI. This year 500 Africans stayed for 6-weeks at top U.S. Universities to study, network, and even meet President Obama. Fifteen wonderful Botswana were among these 500 African leaders. I am excited to announce that an additional group of 500 Africans will go to the U.S. in June 2015 for what is now known as the Mandela Washington Fellowship. Interested Botswana youth between the ages of 25 and 35 can apply online now, until November 5.

In addition to exchanges, such as YALI, I am equally proud to be here today to celebrate another flagship American program, the Ambassador's Fund for Cultural Preservation. Through this fund, my government helps eligible countries around the world to preserve historic sites and manuscripts; museum collections; and, traditional forms of expression such as music, dance, and language. This one-of-a-kind program provides direct support to cultural preservation projects in more than 100 countries.

Today we celebrate our partnership with the Khama III Memorial Museum and officially launch the project entitled Preservation of the Khama Family and Bessie Head Archives of the Post-Colonial Period in Botswana. The U.S. government is pleased to continue our collaboration with the Museum's talented team and its partners.

It is a great source of pride and satisfaction for me and my embassy team to be able to play a role in preserving Botswana's cultural heritage. History is important in every country, and I am convinced that preserving the past is critical to a country's long-term civic health. Historic sites can also make important contributions to the local economy as tourist destinations, which creates jobs and diversifies the economy.

With a grant of almost 80,000 dollars – or 740,000 Pula – the U.S. Embassy is partnering with the Khama III Memorial Museum to preserve numerous Khama Family manuscripts and Bessie Head's literary collections. We will also fund much-needed structural repairs to the building that houses these archives and extend the library here to create a reading room. These collections of documents are of valuable historical, cultural and literary significance, and by maintaining them

properly, we will provide today's young scholars and curious citizens as well as future generations of both with the opportunity to obtain a direct understanding of Botswana's post-colonial period. My hope is that those visitors and scholars will include many Americans.

I suspect it will because this project has many ties with the United States. Bessie Head corresponded with some of America's most important and influential twentieth century writers, including Alice Walker, who won a Pulitzer Prize for fiction for her novel *The Color Purple*, and Toni Morrison, who won a Pulitzer Prize for fiction for the novel *Beloved* and the Nobel Prize for literature in 1993. The great Toni Morrison once said: "I'm interested in the way in which the past affects the present and I think that if we understand a good deal more about history, we automatically understand a great more about contemporary life." All of these writer helped millions of readers do just that through their work.

The connection between our countries does not end with these literary greats. Museum curators have been working with archivists from Howard University and Bates College in the U.S., and through this grant, the collaboration will continue, including on-site technical assistance from visiting professors. The Bessie Head papers have inspired a vast body of academic and literary research - it is essential to properly preserve them. This concept of creating a legacy is well understood by authors and historians. In fact, in 2007, Alice Walker donated her papers, consisting of 122 boxes of manuscripts, draft novels, unpublished poems and correspondence, to Emory University in the U.S.

If you will allow me to push the connection even further to draw a few parallels between America's first President George Washington and Botswana's great Khama Family. Following Washington's death in 1799, his home, Mount Vernon, and important collections fell into disarray, until almost 60 years later, when a non-profit organization acquired and restored the estate. In 1960, Mount Vernon was designated a National Historic Landmark. Today 1 million visitors pass through the museum each year, and can visit the preserved arts, artifacts, and collections of Washington's books and manuscripts. This collection helps visitors and scholars better understand and interpret life in 18th-century America.

Similarly, the Khama III Memorial Museum is located in a building that was formerly a home in the historic Serowe village, and opened years later - in 1985 to be exact - as a public museum. Khama III and Washington are both "Founding Fathers" of their respective countries. The Khama Family papers that will be archived date from 1876 to 1959 detail momentous events such as the visit of the three chiefs to London in 1895 and Tshekedi Khama's campaign opposing South Africa's annexation of Namibia after World War II. These documents help us better understand Botswana and the region's history, but, as Toni Morrison points out, once we understand this history, we better understand the present.

Since 2001, the U.S. government has invested over 200,000 USD - which is over 1.8 million Pula - in five different projects in Botswana through the Ambassador's Fund for Cultural Preservation. We have done this because we believe in the aesthetic, cultural and academic importance of Botswana's heritage. Projects have included the restoration of Old Palapye Church and the Preservation of San Artifacts in the Kuru Cultural Center in D'kar. We provided training in the preservation of ancient rock art sites in Gaborone and at Tsodilo Hills. And last year, we supported the National Museum's leather conservation project to preserve almost 500 artefacts.

In short, from cultural preservation, to national identity, to economic diversification, the arts play an important role in every society. Our efforts under the Ambassador's Cultural Preservation Fund serve as a symbol not only of the partnership between our two countries, but of our respect for Botswana's diverse and fascinating heritage; one that has enriched not only this area of the world but the lives of many Americans.

Thank you to everyone here for your commitment to cultural preservation. And a special thank you to our colleagues from the Government of Botswana and the National Museum for your commitment to protecting and restoring Botswana's historic treasures.

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