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AIDS, Poverty and Economic
Development in South Africa

Hon. Sheila Violet Makate Sisulu
Ambassador of the Republic of South
Africa to the United States of America

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“AIDS, POVERTY AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN SOUTH AFRICA”

AMBASSADOR SHEILA VIOLET MAKATE SISULU

Ambassador of the Republic of South Africa to the United States of America

Remarks presented at the Center for International Studies, University of Missouri-St. Louis,
St. Louis, Missouri, 9 November 2000.

Distinguished guests, Ladies and Gentlemen, Friends of South Africa:

Dr. Glassman, thank you for those kind words of introduction.

I am delighted to be here this evening. I have been told that the last South African who shared this platform was none other than my own church pastor... you probably know him better as the Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, Archbishop Desmond Tutu.....! As you know, “the Arch”, as we affectionately call him visited the Center for International Studies in May of this year, when he was presented with the Global Citizen Award.

At the best of times, Archbishop Tutu is a hard act to follow. As if that were not enough, even he never had to contend with all the ongoing attention to the elections.... How does an Ambassador compete for attention and air time with a new President-elect....?

Speaking of Presidents, I must share with you one of the Archbishop's classic insights: When he was asked by a speaker for advice on how he should introduce President Thabo Mbeki prior to delivering an important address, Archbishop Tutu thought reflectively for a while, before suggesting: “Just say that he is a president who kicks butt....!” I am not sure if Archbishops should be talking of butts, but I assure you, it is an accurate description!

Given the election mode that the United States has been engulfed in recently, I thank you most sincerely for your interest in South Africa and for being here this evening. It is good to be among friends.

I have been asked to address you on the topic of “AIDS, poverty and economic development in South Africa” – all issues on which I could easily speak until the next presidential election...., if you let me..... In the interests of time, I intend to leave you with a few thoughts on each of these areas and would prefer to allow you to ask any questions which you may have afterwards, in order that we can deal in more detail with those aspects in which you are most interested.

It strikes me immediately that these issues, by their very nature, cannot be separated one from the other. Indeed they are very much inter-related.

It is no secret that South Africa is grappling with a growing HIV/AIDS epidemic. At the same time, the Government has also had to contend with other serious diseases, such as malaria and tuberculosis, the two largest killers in Africa.

World attention was sharply focused on the nature and extent of the epidemic in South Africa and on the continent of Africa as a result of the fact that South Africa hosted the 13th International AIDS Conference in Durban in July of this year. This was the first time that this annual conference was held in Africa. This was something which, unfortunately, was long overdue...

It is estimated that more than 30 million people globally are living with HIV and it is estimated that South Africa has 4.2 million people living with HIV/AIDS.

There has been so much inaccurate reporting on this issue, that I must beg your indulgence at this point to unequivocally set the record straight: President Mbeki has never said that HIV does not cause AIDS. Instead, what he has said is that we desperately need more information, in order to be able to make the most effective intervention in the fight against HIV/AIDS possible.

The comprehensive campaign which the South African Government is waging in the fight against HIV/AIDS epidemic is based exactly on the fundamental thesis that HIV causes AIDS. But, it also goes further than that.... It seeks to deal with the context within which we are fighting the epidemic. We have found that you cannot effectively treat the disease in a vacuum. The socio-economic conditions of those affected by the epidemic significantly influence the rate at which the disease spreads.

You cannot, for example, medicate against poverty! This is not to say by any means that "poverty causes AIDS", but poverty is one of the main reasons for the exponential rise in infection rates in South Africa, and indeed in numerous other developing countries. The HIV/AIDS virus does not respect borders, it does not discriminate among social classes, but it does thrive in conditions of malnutrition, exposure to the elements through inadequate housing, the lack of an adequate basic health infrastructure, the spread of other, so-called opportunistic diseases which further weaken the immune systems of those affected, making them more vulnerable to exposure to the virus.

My Government has instituted a systematic, multi-dimensional campaign to combat the epidemic, which involves a partnership with all sectors of civil society, including religious leaders, trade unions and the business community. Our strategy has focused on prevention, through a massive awareness and educational campaign, as well as on care and support for those affected. We have also focused on vaccine development. In our efforts to remove the stigma from this epidemic, we have also sought to protect the rights of those affected. HIV/AIDS is not a notifiable disease in South Africa. My Government has instituted laws to prevent discrimination of persons living with HIV/AIDS. The Employment Equity Act, for example, outlaws the mandatory pre-employment testing of HIV status. It is, unfortunately, within the social arena that most

of the work must still be done to remove the stigma which is so frequently associated with this disease.

The focus on prevention of the disease will remain a mainstay of our work in this area, because, as a developing country, South Africa does not, and will not in the foreseeable future, have sufficient resources to purchase the expensive anti-retroviral drugs which are commonly used by richer, more industrialized countries to treat HIV/AIDS.

This said, the financial resources which we in South Africa have allocated to the campaign against the epidemic have increased seven-fold over the last few years, up from R20 million to R140 million. All South African Government Departments also have their own specific, funded programs to combat the spread of the disease. We mean what we say when we take a multi-disciplinary, comprehensive approach....

There can be no doubt that the HIV/AIDS epidemic is one of the most important challenges that has confronted South Africa since the birth of our new democracy in 1994. This challenge comes at a time when the country is faced with many other competing needs – redressing the imbalances of the past, the need to transform our society, as well as the urgent need to restructure our own economy, in order to be able to compete effectively in an increasingly globalized world.

When it came to power in 1994, the Government inherited serious socioeconomic problems, not least among them being one of the highest income gaps between the rich and the poor of any country in the world. At the same time, the population has looked to the Government for the delivery of long-overdue services in education, housing, health care, welfare and the provision of clean running water and electricity, to name but a few. All this with very limited resources...

Despite very real fiscal constraints, we have, I believe, made remarkable progress in many areas, including:

Our transition towards democracy in South African has translated into peace, stability, development and dignity for our citizens.

Democracy has also directly led the provision of clean running water to six million people, more than one million homes have been built since 1994, our accelerated electrification programme is on target, schooling is now free and compulsory for all children for at least the first ten years; public health care is open to all, with children up to six years of age and pregnant women having free access to health care... These really are dramatic improvements, which have positively impacted on the quality of life of our citizens.

Since 1994, in pursuit of the sustainable economic growth and development which is needed, the South African Government has resolutely implemented prudent fiscal policies.

The Government's Growth, Employment and Redistribution policy, otherwise known by the acronym GEAR, was launched in June 1996. GEAR has sought to define a plan of action for the transformation of the South African economy.

As well as seeking to address socioeconomic imbalances inherent within our country, GEAR is aimed at achieving sustainable economic growth and development.

In this regard, we recognize the imperative of improving South Africa's competitiveness in the global economy and that, as a first step, this has required the transformation of our own economy. This has not been easy, but, difficult economic adjustments must inevitably begin at home. In some industries in South Africa, jobs have been lost as a result of the transformation process. Through attempts to increase growth in non-gold exports, moving away from a resource-based economy to a manufacturing economy, for example, it has been estimated that in excess of a half a million jobs have been lost...! I know of no other elected government which has willingly and more resolutely adopted a strategy of transformation of its economy, despite the cost, with a view to positioning the country for growth and development and to meet the challenges of future global competition, as we have done.

The South African economy ranks about thirtieth in size in the world today, while it is the largest on the African continent. Our economy has recovered from a negative growth rate to an estimated 2 – 3% growth rate this year. The rate of inflation is down from double digits to almost 5% at present.

The prognosis for South Africa's economy remains good. GDP growth is projected to be 3% this year and up to 4% next year, despite high oil prices. Clearly, global economic performance will influence our own economic prospects. The world is not always of our own making. We have, however, taken steps to position ourselves to compete in the global economy as best we can.

I come back to the issue of HIV/AIDS: In South Africa, we are acutely aware of the fact that any failure to respond effectively to this epidemic will result in the reversal of all of the developmental gains which we have made over the last five years. My Government has therefore made the fight against this scourge its top priority. We recently released our five-year strategic plan to combat the epidemic, which includes collaboration with regional and international partners aimed at strengthening our own efforts.

The Government has a broad array of initiatives in place to address the prevailing income inequalities in South Africa, including poverty alleviation and job creation. It has increased the allocation to the national HIV/AIDS Program more than seven fold over the past 5 years.

Poverty has been linked to the difficulty in overcoming the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Poverty is also the result of high levels of unemployment and contributes directly to unacceptable levels of crime. Although in many instances crime levels have decreased, it remains a priority area for government. We are implementing a determined campaign to stamp out crime at all levels. How many Ambassadors do you know who can proudly

claim to have been a member of a community policing unit? I plead guilty to the charge... My point is to try and illustrate that we South Africans all take pride in making a contribution to the common good....

One of the most important challenges facing South Africa is education and human resources development. The Government has allocated the largest percentage of the budget to education because the development of human capital is crucial for future economic success. Skills development in the information technology area is also a high priority.

The bilateral relationship between South Africa and the United States is excellent. South Africa and the United States have a close relationship which has been managed and expanded successfully under the auspices of the BiNational Commission (BNC) which was established in 1995, chaired by then Deputy President Mbeki and Vice President Gore, respectively. The various Committees of the BNC have done sterling work to generate new areas of bilateral cooperation, to the mutual benefit of all of our peoples. Through the BNC, a number of important projects have been initiated between government agencies and Departments and their counterparts in both countries. International partnerships are important for South Africa and, as Ambassador to the United States, I am proud of the excellent bilateral relationship which our two countries presently enjoy.

Bilateral trade between South Africa and the United States is still expanding and bilateral trade between the two countries is estimated to be 6 to 7 billion dollars for the year 2000.

In this respect, I wish to acknowledge the successful visit of a Missouri business mission which took place from 3 June to 14 June this year and looked at the areas of health care, construction, engineering and environmental technologies. I am optimistic that this will contribute to extending trade relations between our two countries and thereby assist the African Renaissance theme.

We South Africans are no strangers to challenges in the face of adversity. My beloved country has embarked upon a journey that has already seen it confound friends and foes alike by the fact that we have succeeded against seemingly overwhelming odds. We shall do so again, despite the fact that we continue to face some of our most daunting challenges yet. It is after all not only our own future and prosperity which depends on our success... Poverty, HIV/AIDS and the need to promote greater equity and economic prosperity among all nations, the developed and the undeveloped, are the challenges which face us all.

I trust that I have succeeded in demonstrating to you just how interrelated these issues really are... and also, that they are of critical importance to all of us.

I thank you for your kind attention.

APPENDIX A

Center for International Studies,
University of Missouri-St. Louis

AIDS

POVERTY

ECONOMIC

DEVELOP-
MENT

IN SOUTH AFRICA



featuring
SHELIA VIOLET MAKATE SISULU
South African Ambassador to the United States

In 1999, President Nelson Mandela appointed Ms. Sisulu as South Africa's Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary to the United States of America. She was appointed Consul-General at the South African Consulate-General in New York in 1997. After the first democratic elections in 1994, Ms. Sisulu became special advisor to the Minister of Education and advised on special projects including youth, health, AIDS, gender and early childhood education as well as establishing a youth commission in the Office of the Deputy President. Between 1978 and 1988, she held senior positions in the South African committee for Higher Education. From 1988 to 1991 she was the Education Coordinator of the African Bursary Fund of the South African Council of Churches. In 1991, Ms. Sisulu became director of the Joint Enrichment Project. She is a graduate of The University of Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland and The University of Witwatersrand-Johannesburg, South Africa.

THURSDAY 9 NOVEMBER 2000

7:30 PM - Reception

**8:00 PM - Lecture: AIDS, Poverty and Economic
Development in South Africa**

**SUMMIT LOUNGE, University Center
University of Missouri-St. Louis**

Free Admission - R.S.V.P. 314-516-7299

