

Testimony of Howard A. Van Vranken
Nominee to U.S. Ambassador to the Republic of Botswana
Senate Committee on Foreign Relations
September 29, 2021

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member, and Members of the Committee:

It is a great privilege and honor to appear before you today as President Biden's nominee to serve as the next Ambassador to the Republic of Botswana. I thank the President and Secretary Blinken for their confidence in me. I am also grateful for this distinguished committee's consideration. I am especially grateful for my wife, Rebecca, who has supported me during nearly two decades of marriage, and for the endurance of my children, Grace, Robert, and Victor. I would not be here today without their tremendous support. Finally, I can say that my parents, Robert and Helen, tirelessly inspired me to explore and embrace the world beyond my native California and I am forever grateful for their sacrifices on my behalf.

During my thirty-three years in the Foreign Service, my work in Africa and the Middle East, as well as assignments in Washington, have prepared me to deliver impactful results for the American people in the important role for which I have been nominated. I have served in senior leadership positions in a number of posts including, most recently, in Morocco and Iraq. If confirmed, I will work diligently and with integrity to further strengthen ties between the United States and Botswana.

Botswana is strategically important and a reliable partner on the African continent. We work with Botswana to advance shared global priorities, including strengthening democratic institutions and promoting respect for human rights, ending AIDS and the COVID-19 pandemic, and advancing global health security. Together, we also work on regional and bilateral priorities, including conserving the environment and natural resources, expanding trade and investment, and addressing regional transnational criminal and security challenges. Our relationship is further strengthened through our valuable university partnerships and education linkages. If confirmed, as we emerge from the pandemic, I will look to expand our in-person engagement to advance these priorities, especially through programming focused on the youth and young women and girls.

Economic ties between the United States and Botswana were growing before the pandemic. Even as the United States remains the world's top purchaser of Botswana's diamonds, we will support Botswana's efforts to diversify its economy, to build a knowledge-based economy, and to improve opportunities for American businesses. U.S. tourists, attracted to the country's globally significant national parks and reserves, will continue to present an important opportunity for Botswana as the pandemic recedes and travel resumes. If confirmed, I will work with Botswana to deter and dismantle poaching organizations. If confirmed, I will work with Botswana to realize the potential offered by Power Africa's Mega Solar project, an initiative which could transform Botswana into a regionally significant solar power producer, consumer, and exporter. If confirmed, I will also continue to advance the priorities articulated in the DELTA Act to promote responsible natural resource and wildlife management practices in the greater Okavango River Basin.

The United States has invested more than \$1 billion in Botswana's health sector through the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) program. While there are still an estimated 9,000 new HIV infections annually in the country, Botswana has made impressive progress in its fight against HIV/AIDS and is near epidemic control. That said, the threat posed by HIV/AIDS cannot be underestimated. If confirmed, I look forward to securing the sustainability of our PEPFAR investment and leading our interagency health team as we continue to work with the Government of Botswana on its HIV response. If confirmed, I will also work to affirm President Biden's commitment to deliver additional COVID-19 vaccines to Botswana and its neighbors.

The Botswana Defense Force is one of the most professional militaries on the continent, and our military engagement remains strong. The United States also sponsors the International Law Enforcement Academy, which has trained more than 12,000 law-enforcement and criminal justice professionals from Africa, the Americas, and Southeast Asia. Support to these institutions has improved rule of law in the country and on the continent, including capacity to effectively respond to global issues like wildlife and timber trafficking, violent extremism, cyber-crime, corruption and trafficking in persons. If confirmed, I will work to expand U.S.-Botswana military partnerships and our regional security role through education and training programs.

We expect to see a resurgence in the number of Americans visiting Botswana once we emerge from the pandemic. The safety of our staff and U.S. citizens will remain paramount.

The U.S. Ambassador to Botswana also serves as the U.S. representative to the Southern African Development Community, and I am excited about the opportunity to work towards increased security, health, and economic development across the region with other southern Africa nations.

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. I look forward to your questions.