

# Follow my lead—ambassador

BY MGOBILE NDLOVU

**MATSAPHA**—The United States continues to lead the world and show its commitment in the fight against HIV/AIDS as portrayed by the visiting American Ambassador Randall Tobias, who led by example and took a public test yesterday at PSI Swaziland VCT in Matsapha.

His spirit to lead by example also inspired the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare Principal Secretary, Dr. John Kunene to follow suit.

The Times SUNDAY was informed that Tobias usually takes these tests wherever he visits to prove to the public that how easy it is to do it and most importantly its essentiality to a person's health.

"There is absolutely no substitute for strong, national leadership and what you are seeing right here—our willingness to be tested publicly is our way of trying to educate people in the country about the importance of counselling and testing. This is but one example of extraordinary leadership on national platform," said the ambassador at a press briefing held immediately after his public test.

Dr Kunene echoed the ambassador's sentiment, "We encourage all and sundry to follow suit to determine whether one is infected or not and start living positive thus maximizing your lifespan," he said.

## ...as visiting Ambassador Tobias takes public HIV test

Tobias is the United States Global AIDS Coordinator and he is on a two-day tour of the country to advance the HIV/AIDS prevention, care and treatment goals laid out by President George W. Bush in his Emergency Plan for Aids Relief (PERFAR).

### Leading

He arrived in the country on Friday leading a delegation from the US government and USAID-South Africa.

The ambassador is responsible for advising, directing and overseeing programmes under PERFAR, which is the US President's "vast and ambitious programmes for combating HIV/AIDS on a global scale, under which the US government has committed US\$15 billion (E97 500 billion) to turn the tide against this growing pandemic."

"At present Swaziland has the highest

rate of HIV/AIDS prevalence throughout the world thus making it the prime Sub Saharan country we are focused on to offer our assistance in terms of combating the scourge," he said.

Swaziland is among the 123 countries around the world currently benefiting from Bush's Emergency Plan. He encouraged those in key positions to be seen playing the part in the fight against the scourge and appealed for collaborative efforts from the state, leaders, government, church and community leaders to stand up and work together in order to bring a solution to the problem destroying the tiny nation.

### Strong

"There are absolutely no substitutes for strong national leadership. It doesn't matter that your country is highly infected but good results can be realised if you can work together. We are all part of the global community trying to work together to eradicate the scourge—and we, the US Government, are anxious to help the people of Swaziland, that is why we are here," he added.

Prior to taking the public test the ambassador, accompanied by the PS, first visited several US government-funded projects. These included the Raleigh Fitkin Memorial (RFM) Hospital currently receiving funding and technical assistance for the implementation of co-ordinated activities towards improving access and use of ART.

### Discussions

He also visited a Neighborhood Care Point—The Children's Cup at Gigi's Place, which caters for 230 orphaned and vulnerable children (OVCs). Thereafter he held discussions with several church leaders to ascertain ways in which the congregation can be engaged in order to enhance the national HIV/AIDS response.

Meanwhile, statistics indicate that 42.6% of the country's population is infected with the virus. An estimated 200,000 are believed to be positive out of a population of only one million and the death toll from AIDS now reaches 20,000 annually.

The country already has the statistics of 70 000 AIDS orphans and projections reveal that the number will reach 120 000 by 2010.

Despite the grim reality, Ambassador Tobias assured the Swazi Nation that "My reason for coming is to better understand the issues that the Ministry of Health and the government of Swaziland are facing and the ways in which the US government can help address those issues".



**I LOVE THIS:** US Ambassador Randall Tobias reacts after being presented with a Swazi ilhiya at Gigi's kitchen.