

**Official Launch of the National Plan of Action for Orphans and Vulnerable Children,
Remarks by Eric Benjaminson, Chargé d'Affaires, U.S. Embassy Windhoek
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Parliament Gardens, Windhoek**

HIV/AIDS has taken the mother, or father, or both, from approximately 14 million children globally, thereby designating those children as AIDS orphans. Projections are that the number of AIDS orphans will increase to 28 million over the next ten years. Today in Namibia, it is estimated that there are 175,000 orphans, with 135,000 children orphaned due to HIV/AIDS. We need to care for these Namibian orphans and prevent their number from rising.

Therefore, it is my privilege to join you here today on behalf of the United States Government for the launch of the National Plan of Action for Orphans and Vulnerable Children 2006-2010 (NPA). Hosting this launch at the seat of Namibia's government underscores the fact that the needs of Namibia's orphans and vulnerable children remain a national priority.

The development of this plan of action is the result of the long work of the Ministry of Gender Equality and Child Welfare, and many of its OVC partners, to which the U.S. Government and UNICEF have been proud contributors. The collaborative process has been multi-sectoral, with many non-governmental, community, and faith-based partners participating through the support of the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief. I am particularly pleased that this cooperation has produced a monitoring and evaluation framework to guide the plan. We recognize that this plan has been widely approved with all stakeholders, and we stand ready to ensure that it is implemented as rapidly as possible and that it meets its goals. In order for the plan to succeed, however, the government of Namibia must allocate the necessary resources so that the Ministry of Gender, Equality, and Child Welfare can take action.

And why do we think this National Plan of Action is so important? We are all painfully aware of the worst case orphan scenario for Namibia: that by the year 2021, there will be an estimated 250,000 orphans in Namibia -- that is 1 in 3 children. Our current best estimates suggest that almost 200,000 of these children will have lost their mother, father, or both parents due to HIV/AIDS. We must not allow this scenario to become reality.

One of the U. S. government's main responsibilities under the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, known as PEPFAR, is to support the implementation of this plan. PEPFAR has allocated over \$N 98 million for OVC care and support since 2004, with an additional \$N 60 million planned in 2008. These resources sustain OVCs in many areas: care giver training, access to education, economic support, targeted food and nutritional assistance, legal aid, medical care, psychological and emotional counseling, and other material support. As of March 2007, PEPFAR funds have assisted over 112,000 Namibian orphans.

Having stated the magnitude of the problem, let's look back at the role of the National Plan of Action. The plan provides a unifying vision to mobilize all partners. A central role, rightly so, is reserved for the Ministry of Gender Equality and Child Welfare which shoulders the main responsibility for overall coordination and implementation efforts. There is, however, a clear need for multi-sector implementation of the National Plan of Action through the Permanent Task Force for Orphans and Vulnerable Children. Meeting the needs of orphans and vulnerable children is not just a welfare issue that lies in the hands of the Ministry of Gender Equality and Child Welfare alone. All ministries and sectors must recommit to meaningful and urgent participation in the Permanent Task Force. I assure you that the U. S. Government remains committed to supporting all of you – with funding, technical assistance, and contractor support -- to realize implementation of this National Plan of Action.

We commend the Prime Minister for supporting the Ministry by putting the structure of the Child Welfare Directorate in place to support implementation efforts. We also commend the decision by the Namibian Government to provide the necessary resources to realize implementation of this plan. The Ministry must have these resources to support the Child Welfare Directorate. This year, the U. S. Government and UNICEF supported the Ministry in analyzing its human resources and other related capabilities. As a result, we have a clearer vision of how to assist the Ministry in realizing the objectives set out in this National Plan of Action. We urge the Ministry to follow-up quickly with the recommendations from this analysis.

Another key element of the plan will be its implementation at the local level. Due to the urgency and complexity of the OVC issue, Namibia has developed multiple, parallel implementing groups at the local level. They attempt to promote community capacity development to support orphans, people living with HIV/AIDS, and education efforts. We must find avenues at the local

and regional level to work together strategically. I urgently call on all stakeholders to maximize coordination and efficiency within these existing structures.

The U. S. Government looks forward to working closely with the Ministry of Gender Equality and Child Welfare to advocate for increased support and to prepare the groundwork so that the Government of the Republic of Namibia can ultimately take up this task. We recognize that we must implement this multi-sectoral plan together, working across Ministries and sectors, to secure hope for Namibia's future generation.

I thank you.