

**Testimony of Lisa Peterson
Ambassador Designate to the Kingdom of Swaziland**

Senate Foreign Relations Committee

**Subcommittee on African Affairs, Global Health, Human Rights and
International Organizations**

November 3, 2015

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

It is a great honor for me to appear before you today as President Obama's nominee to be Ambassador to the Kingdom of Swaziland. I am happy to have with me today my husband Siza Ntshakala and my son Thabo. They have made tremendous sacrifices for my Foreign Service career. I am grateful for their love and support, which have helped bring me to the threshold of this potential new, challenging, and exciting assignment.

Mr. Chairman, if confirmed, I look forward to working with you and the Honorable members of this Committee to advance the interests and values of the United States and the American people in Swaziland.

Service in Swaziland would offer me the opportunity to utilize the experience I have developed over years of work throughout Africa. My decision to remain in Africa was, in many ways, shaped by my first tour in the Central African Republic. There, I had the opportunity to work with officials of the sole political party as they grappled with demands for change. I also had the chance to work with citizens who were coalescing around calls for multiparty democracy and with a trade union movement battling to advocate for workers' rights in the face of

government harassment and restrictions. Since then, I have collaborated with human rights advocates, supported grassroots democracy education efforts, and advocated for democratic organizations and movements from South Africa to South Sudan and from Kenya to Nigeria. HIV/AIDS has been a constant focus throughout my assignments, culminating in my support for the development of Mission Cameroon's first country strategy for the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR). If confirmed, I am particularly looking forward to continuing Mission Swaziland's work to combine these two priorities – expanding Swazi ownership of the HIV/AIDS response while strengthening the ability of Swazi citizens to hold their government accountable for performance across all sectors, including but not limited to health.

The United States maintains one of the few resident diplomatic missions in the Kingdom of Swaziland. Our relationship with the people of Swaziland is an important partnership. The new embassy building that will open next year in Mbabane is a powerful symbol of the value the U.S. places on that relationship and will be a great platform for outreach to the Swazi people.

If confirmed, I will continue to engage the Swazi government as well. I would like to see the king and his advisors enter into an ongoing dialogue with civil society. Swazi citizens still have limited ability to engage meaningfully in public policy decisions, and basic rights such as the freedoms of peaceful assembly, association, and expression are restricted. Dialogue with civil society will help open the way for citizen engagement in policy decisions, which will help ensure the best policy outcomes.

Swaziland is facing a declining economy. This is partially due to a broader regional economic downturn, but also due to the loss of African Growth and Opportunity (AGOA) trade preferences. Swaziland was suspended from AGOA membership in January, after the government failed to meet established benchmarks to strengthen its human rights record, despite several years of engagement by the U.S. government. These benchmarks involve the same basic rights for which Swazi civil society advocates: freedom of peaceful assembly, association, expression, and other essential freedoms. Drawing on my experience with the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, I will support those who strive to hold the government accountable and uphold democratic values. I will support civil society, labor unions, and media, to create space for needed political dialogue amongst all the stakeholders in Swaziland.

The people of Swaziland want what the people of the United States want: peace, stability, economic prosperity, and an opportunity for their children to build better lives for themselves. They also hope that their children will be healthy enough to have that opportunity. Swaziland's 26% HIV prevalence rate is the highest in the world, and the nation is suffering a severe tuberculosis crisis. Thanks to the resources available through PEPFAR, the United States has helped save tens of thousands of lives in Swaziland. Embassy Mbabane has been actively coordinating with the Swazi government and other donors to control the epidemic by strengthening health infrastructure, increasing the capacity of the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare and the National Emergency Response Council for HIV/AIDS, and developing a whole of government approach to the crisis.

These efforts have generated results. In 2004, prior to PEPFAR, fewer than 500 people were on antiretroviral therapy. Now, more than 130,000 people in Swaziland receive treatment. With the new guidance for starting treatment early in the disease progression, and the potential to implement a “test and start” program, those numbers should increase even further. In recent years, the Swazi government has procured its own medicines and laboratory commodities, although the supply chain continues to face challenges and needs ongoing support. If confirmed, I would look to build on the Embassy’s ongoing work to continue engaging national, regional, and local community leaders about efforts to create sustainable programs for an AIDS-Free generation.

The U.S. Mission in Swaziland engages with both national leaders and at grass roots levels across Swaziland. In addition, Peace Corps volunteers are actively engaged in community health and HIV prevention programs. These volunteers are tangible representatives of the interest and concern of the United States for the people of Swaziland.

If confirmed, I am also passionate about working with Swaziland’s young women and girls to help them realize their full potential, including because young women who feel empowered are less likely to be at risk for HIV. To that end, Swaziland is a partner in the new DREAMS initiative, which aims to enable adolescent girls and young women to become Determined, Resilient, Empowered, AIDS-Free, Mentored and Safe. If confirmed, I will continue efforts to work closely with the Government of the Kingdom of Swaziland and civil society to enhance the status of women and girls, in order to help address the HIV/AIDS epidemic, support poverty alleviation efforts, and uphold universal human rights.

A stable Swaziland is important to U.S. regional strategic interests, but, long term stability is not possible where citizens are unable to use their voices to hold government accountable for its actions. If confirmed, I will draw on the strong bilateral relationship between the United States and Swaziland to continue encouraging the Kingdom to improve its record on human rights and fundamental freedoms. This will also help Swaziland meet the benchmarks for AGOA eligibility, which will benefit the Swazi economy. I will also ensure that our health programming builds on success and innovates for sustainability, saving the lives of Swazi citizens and helping preserve family units. And I will continue to engage in cross-cutting areas, such as civil society's ability to advocate on issues from preventing gender-based violence to protection of marginalized groups to institutionalizing the rule of law. Encouraged by the mutual respect between our two nations and energized by the challenges that lie ahead, I would be honored, if confirmed, to serve as U.S. Ambassador to Swaziland.

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, I want to thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. I will be happy to answer any questions you have.