

COMMISSION ON HUMAN RIGHTS
Sub-Commission on Promotion and Protection of Human Rights
Working Group on Minorities
10th Session,
March 1-5, 2004

**Response to the Statement by the Ambassador-Permanent Representative
of the Republic of Botswana, Mr. Charles Ntwaagae to the Working Group
on Minorities**

By:

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Thank you Mr. Chairman for this opportunity to respond to the statements made by the Ambassador-Permanent Representative of the Republic of Botswana. I wish to also take this opportunity to thank him for the response, which in my view facilitates a healthy dialogue. Within the time constraints, I would isolate a few points to which I will respond. Before I do that, I would like to draw to the attention of the Working Group to the fact that I will make the following documents available to the Secretariat, which should provide sufficient information on the issues discussed:

- a. Bill No. 31 of 2003
- b. Reaction of my organization to the Bill- a synthesis of the Bill
- c. The Reaction of the Wayeyi tribe, who went to Court in 1999- addressing the Bill and its relationship to the Court order.
- d. Concluding Observations of the CERD at its 62nd Session of August 2002.

1. I am glad that in his statement the Ambassador has made statements, which indicate the Government's assimilationistic policies/tendencies, the suppression and oppression of ethnic identities of the Non-Tswana speaking tribes. These statements are on page 2 and I quote:

‘In our nation building efforts, we have tended to promote things which promote our unity as a nation rather than those which divide us (and fragment us) into tribal or ethnic compartments. For us, nation building is of paramount importance. No single tribal or ethnic group in Botswana is greater than the nation of which is a part’

2. This is the position of the Government of which we are in disagreement, on the issue of nation building. While government believes that nation building means getting rid of cultural differences and embracing and recognizing one language and one culture, that of the selected eight Tswana ethnic groups, we on the other hand, believe that nation building should acknowledge, cherish and nurture the diversity of ethnic groups, languages, cultural traditions represented in the nation.

3. While in some parts of the statement, the Ambassador states that Government acknowledges cultural diversity he has not provided any evidence of how the government is implementing its commitment to this

diversity. Lack of action in this area, and the deliberate ban on the use of languages, including announcements on national radio in these languages does indicate the truthfulness of the above quoted assimilationistic tendency.

3. Unity to us is not synonymous with uniformity. What the government calls fragments of the nations, compartments of the nation are primordial cultures and traditions of the nation and to try to erase all these just because they are different from the Tswana, is a silent genocide on the languages and cultures of the peoples of Botswana. The promotion of one language and one culture has resulted into supremacy of Tswana tribes, and the Tswana have come to represent the state power to be protected, hence considered majority. On the other hand, the non- Tswana ethnic groups represent the people's power not recognized but rather suppressed by the state, hence considered minorities. The assimilationistic policy has divided the nation into these two dichotomies hence not achieving true nationhood. We believe that after 39 years of independence our nationhood is not in question, what is in question is however, its character and how it accords equal participation, self-actualization and rights to all its citizens before the law.

4. It is important to note that the Ambassador makes reference to the fact that minorities could seek redress in the courts. This suggests that government is not willing to listen, let alone to address the voices of minorities, hence they must go to court. Well, yes, they have done so as evidenced by the Wayeyi court case. Three years after the court order nothing has happened. The Ambassador has rightly pointed out that the Bill shall only increase membership to the House of Chiefs and not recognize the historically unrecognized tribes nor admit their chiefs into the House. The Bill is therefore no answer as it ignores the voices of the minorities.

5. The Honorable Ambassador made reference to the fact that Botswana is a land of equal opportunity in which even members of the minority groups hold high positions in government. While this is true, it does not in any way suggest the absence of discrimination and assimilation. This kind of argument advanced here is one of those that raise high emotional reactions among minorities. The import of such an argument is that, minorities have no right to education and employment, hence if they happened to be educated and employed, they must pay a heavy price, that of losing their language, culture and ethnic identity in order to be accepted as members of the nation state. We have rejected this notion as highly insensitive and have urged Government to avoid raising it for the sake of peace. We

believe that, just like our Tswana counter parts, who hold high posts but are not expected to pay this price, we are not going to pay and we shall continue to assert our cultural identities and our rights as citizens and as minorities. On this score, I wish to encourage the Working Group to advise the government of Botswana to be sensitive in dealing with minority issues. Mr. Chairman, just for the good sake of having correct information before this honorable house, I also wish to state that I am Dean of Faculty of Education and not Head of Department of African Languages as the Ambassador has stated. I am therefore familiar with the Revised National Policy on Education of 1994.

6. On the relocation of the Basarwa, the Ambassador has rightly pointed out that it is Government's decision to move the Basarwa in order to provide them with social amenities. What is not being told to the Working Group is what the Basarwa say about this decision. The Basarwa are members of our Coalition and from the reports they give to our Committee are that their standard of living is not getting better but worse and this is why they are going to court in May 2004. This is an area which needs further study as the Basarwa are both a minority and indigenous people in Botswana (though such status is not recognized by Government). The Report of the Special Rapporteur on Indigenous people points to the fact that the culture of these people is under serious threat. The hunter-gatherer life style is sustainable as the Basarwa have lived in the CKGR since time immemorial and they have not destroyed the environment. It is the rich cattle owners who have destroyed the environment in many parts of the country and they are not being moved.

7. The Ambassador mentioned a feasibility study meant to 'introduce additional medium of instruction and mother tongue teaching in early stages of children's education'. I am not aware of this study but it would be a welcome development. What I am aware of is a study in the context of the Revised National Policy on Education (approved by Parliament in 1994), Recommendation 32, which suggested an increase in the number of optional subjects at Junior secondary level by adding one other language. Parliament rejected the Commissions recommendation to introduce mother tongue at pre-school and early primary level on ground of resources. The study analyzed the development of the various languages in Botswana, in terms of having basic materials, writing systems, and so on. The study was completed in 2002 and the report has not been made public. We do hope that this study would not only recommend one optional language at Junior secondary level, or select languages on the basis of political affiliation of its membership, but rather the introduction of languages which have

writing systems and put in place mechanisms to continue to develop others.

8. We do not see the question of resources as an issue, given the economic standing of our nation. If nation building is of paramount importance, we must invest in it by nursing its diversity. The existence of cultural associations was triggered by exclusionary policies and these were attempts by various ethnic groups to maintain their linguistic and cultural identities. It has not been easy for these organizations, especially on its leadership as they have been labeled as separatists, unpatriotic and trouble makers. We however hope for a better atmosphere to exist between these organizations and government, more specially that they have now registered as a coalition to speak with one voice. It has always been our wish to be encouraged by government in our efforts and we hope for more support in terms of resources to further our work.

9. We have rejected the notion that in order to bring about change, the process should be evolutionary and long. In an assimilationistic situation, the longer it takes, the more difficult its effects can be reversed. The problem of discrimination in the laws was first raised in parliament in 1969 three years after independence, then in 1988 and then in 1995. Many language speakers have lost their languages, or they no longer pass them onto their children. All this is because we have waited too long.

10. We therefore encourage the Working Group to appoint a country Rapporteur for Botswana to study among other aspects, the situation of the loss of Minority languages and cultures that has taken place thus far and recommend what could be done to curb this process.

I thank you Mr. Chairman