

Ambassador Marcia Bernicat

Remarks

Women's Soccer Tournament and Ball Donation

March 5, 2011

Ebbets Field, Dakar

The Honorable Minister of Sports,

Ladies Turn Organizers,

Soccer players, friends and family,

On behalf of the U.S. Embassy, I am honored to welcome you to one of my favorite places in Dakar, Ebbets Field. It is named in honor of the field in Brooklyn, New York where in 1947 Jackie Robinson became the first African-American to play in a Major League Baseball game.

Today, Dakar's own Ebbets Field is about to make some history of its own by hosting its first women's soccer tournament. We are very proud to be doing this in collaboration with Ladies' Turn.

Ladies' Turn is a non-profit association working to bring soccer to Senegalese girls and women. Through soccer, these remarkable young women get the opportunity to develop important leadership and teamwork skills. Ladies' Turn recognizes that women's soccer is a powerful tool for promoting gender equality, both by empowering women who play and by presenting women in new roles as athletes. The Embassy supports Ladies' Turn and other organizations like it as part of our commitment to promoting equal education, health care, employment, and sports opportunities for girls and women all around Senegal.

Ladies' Turn started in Senegal in 2009, and has grown to include four different regions in Senegal -- Dakar, Saint Louis, Kaolack and Fatick. In 2011, young women who wish to play soccer in Senegal have more opportunities than ever. This year, over 700 girls are participating in Ladies' Turn matches. The girls and women participating in this tournament range in age from 12 to 31. Thank you Ladies' Turn for your initiative!

I would also particularly like to thank the Minister of Sports Mr. Diatta (TBC) for coming to today's tournament. Your presence demonstrates dedication to our common goal -- empowering young women. I want to encourage you to share with your colleagues what you see here today, and remind them of how important girls' sports are in developing the self-confidence of our young women everywhere.

Though we support initiatives for women throughout the year, it is particularly appropriate that this event is taking place in March, which is Women's History Month in the United States. March 8 was first celebrated as International Women's Day in Europe in 1911. However, in 1987 the U.S. Congress decided that women deserved to be celebrated for an entire month!

In the United States we have a rich tradition of women's sports, but women had to fight for equal opportunities to play sports. When our Title Nine law passed in 1972, it required that female and male athletes have equal access to good fields, equipment, uniforms, and matches against quality opponents. It was a long-awaited victory for women's rights.

However, in spite of efforts like the one we see today, Senegalese women athletes still lag far behind their male counterparts when it comes to equal access to all forms of sports opportunities.

Thanks to the efforts of Ladies' Turn, many girls have been able to play in organized soccer tournaments for the first time. Participation in team sports is incredibly beneficial to the personal development of both girls and boys. By playing team sports, girls in Senegal are now also developing important teamwork and leadership skills. And athletes are less likely to drop out of school than those that don't play sports. In short, sports open up a world full of possibilities for all athletes.

Though we would like to see more and more women take on sports leadership positions, it is important to highlight that since Ladies' Turn was created in 2009, men have also been major champions for women's soccer. Men serve as dedicated coaches and referees and serve in equal numbers with women in the Ladies' Turn association. So, I congratulate these dedicated women and men for their involvement in girls' soccer.

And now for the fun part!

Today, the United States Government, thanks to our Africa Command, will offer 1,000 soccer balls to Ladies' Turn to help ensure that every girl who wants the chance, an opportunity to play soccer.

I'm told that a donation on this scale is unprecedented for women's sports in Senegal. We hope that it will increase the visibility of women athletes, and encourage more girls to play sports. With those girls in mind, I am honored to present these balls on behalf of the United States Government. Ladies' Turn will distribute the remaining balls to women's teams and tournaments throughout Senegal.

Ladies' Turn works closely with the Senegalese government and with local communities to mobilize local resources to support its efforts. I encourage you to continue to support both this organization and other women's sports initiatives in the country. In spite of the challenges, I see a bright future for Senegal's women athletes. And today we'll get a chance to cheer some girls who are part of that future.

In addition to the game we're getting ready to see, in Kaolack today the two best teams from Kaolack and Fatick are also playing their semi-final. And next Saturday, on March 12, the winners of these semi-final matches will play in the Ladies' Turn final event at Alassane Djigo in Pikine. Please come out and support them.

Now I invite you all to watch the best beginner girls' teams from Saint Louis and Dakar compete in their semi-final match.

"May the best team win!" "*Ku mën sa morom dumma!*" (Idiomatic Wolof expression for "May the best one win").