Ambassador Stephen J. Nolan
Remarks for Film Festival Opening
Commemorating Black History Month
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As prepared for delivery

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

- Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Academic Affairs, Frank Youngman
- Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Financial Services, Dr. Dawid Katzke
- Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Student Services, Professor Lydia Ramahobo
- Dean of Humanities, Professor Kgomotso Moahi
- Acting Director Library services, Mrs. Duduzile Mbaakanyi

REMARKS:

- Ladies and gentlemen, it is my pleasure to join you here at the University of Botswana Library for this very special evening as we commemorate Black History Month.

- Tonight, we come together to celebrate the lives and stories of African Americans whose history is an essential thread of the American fabric, for it traces our ongoing journey to improve the nation we have built together.

- Each February, Americans pause to remember the lives of Americans who arrived on our shores not as free men, but as slaves. These men, women and children, and several generations of their children, endured the profound injustice of racial oppression.

- Tonight we especially honor those African Americans who, through their abundant talents and unbending will, transcended this bitter legacy and changed my country's history.

- Nearly 100 years ago, a black American historian, Carter G. Woodson, saw that the history of the African diaspora in America had never been chronicled, and was slipping away forever.

- Woodson founded the Association for the Study of African American Life and History and initiated "Negro History Week," during the second week of February to mark the birthdays of Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass. The week was later extended to a month and renamed Black History Month.

- This year's theme, "African Americans and the Civil War," calls on us to honor the efforts of people of African descent to destroy slavery and promote universal freedom in the United States.

- In 1861, as the United States stood at the brink of Civil War, people of African descent, both enslaved and free persons, waited with a watchful eye.

- They understood that a war between the North and the South might bring about jubilee – the destruction of slavery and universal freedom.

- When the Confederacy fired upon Fort Sumter and war ensued, President Abraham Lincoln maintained that the paramount cause was to preserve the Union, not end slavery.

- Frederick Douglass, the most prominent black leader, said at the time that regardless of intentions, the war would indeed end slavery, which he termed America's quote-unquote "peculiar institution."

- Over the course of the war, the four million people of African descent in the United States proved Douglass right. Free and enslaved blacks rallied around the Union flag in the cause of freedom.

- From the cotton and tobacco fields of the South to the small towns and big cities of the North, nearly 200,000 joined the Grand Army of the Republic and took up arms to destroy the Confederacy.

- They served as recruiters, soldiers, nurses, and spies, and endured unequal treatment, massacres, and riots as they pursued their quest for freedom and equality.

- Their record of service is extraordinary, and their efforts were crucial to saving the Union.

- Carter Woodson, Frederick Douglass, and indeed Abraham Lincoln would look today at that Union that was saved and say that we have come a long way, yet we have far to go.

- As President Barack Obama said, "Racial prejudice is no longer the steepest barrier to opportunity for most African Americans, yet substantial obstacles remain in the remnants of past discrimination. Structural inequalities – from disparities in education and health care to the vicious cycle of poverty – still pose enormous hurdles for black communities across America."

- While today's challenges are very different from those overcome by black Americans 200 years ago or even 50 years ago – the same dedication to justice, equality, tolerance, and openness to cooperation and collaboration is no less important today.

- Justice … equality … tolerance … openness to cooperation. These are foundation stones from which better nations emerge. I am proud that my country has grown in these areas – and I know it will continue to grow.

- When I look around Botswana, at today's leaders, and more importantly, at tomorrow's leaders, I see a similar commitment.

- It is not an overstatement to say that on this campus, the Botswana that will exist in 30 years is being determined today.

- This country's future will not be determined by the stones that emerge from ground, but by the knowledge and imagination that emerge from the minds of today's youth – and that future is bright indeed.

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- Tonight, we kick off a celebration of the history and achievements of Americans of African descent. I thank you for joining me in this celebration, and I challenge you,

as Batswana, set your course for the possible – and let it be based on justice, equality, tolerance, and cooperation.

- My own country has come far on that course – no doubt we have far to go – but the distance that America has travelled is demonstrated no more clearly than by President Barack Obama, the man himself and the office he holds.

- For that reason, we begin this year's film festival with his story.

- Vice-Chancellor, again, I am proud to join you and the University in participating in this festival as we celebrate together Black History Month.

- Thank you.