

Visit by the High Commissioner for the Kingdom of Lesotho

I was excited to meet the High Commissioner for the Kingdom of Lesotho - on her first official visit to Western Australia in March - Her Excellency, Ms Ntsebe Idlett Kokome. Attending the High Commissioner was First Secretary, Mr Sizakeko Yengane.

I knew a little about the Kingdom of Lesotho, having toured neighbouring South Africa with the Australian Schoolboy Cricket Team in 1967-68. I was eager to meet the High Commissioner and to learn more about the country.

The Kingdom of Lesotho, previously known as Basutoland, became independent from the United Kingdom in 1966. Lesotho is a member of the Commonwealth. It is a landlocked country, entirely surrounded by the Republic of South Africa. Lesotho has a population of 1.9 million of which 80% are Christians.

The High Commissioner explained that the Lesotho Government is very similar to Australia's. It is a parliamentary constitutional monarchy and its legal system is based on the English common law and Roman-Dutch law. The Chief of State is King Letsie III (since February 1966) and the current Prime Minister is Pakalitha Mosisili (since May 1998).

Lesotho's economy is based on selling power and water to South Africa, remittances from miners employed in South Africa, customs duties from the Southern Africa Customs Union and export revenue for the majority of government revenue. Its biggest exports are apparel, diamonds and water. Lesotho has produced three of the world's largest diamonds from the Letseng mine.

It was interesting to learn that Lesotho's economic growth has recovered to 5.6% in 2010, after it fell to 0.9% in 2009 due to the effects of the Global Financial Crisis that caused a fall in demand for the country's exports. The unemployment rate in 2002 was 45% and in 1999, 49% of the population lived below the poverty level.

The High Commissioner is very passionate about teaching Lesotho citizens about HIV/AIDS, as nearly a quarter of the adult population in Lesotho is estimated to be HIV positive, the third largest HIV prevalence in the world. In 2008, the National AIDS Commission estimated that 23.6% of the adult population was HIV positive. The Government of Lesotho has declared HIV/AIDS as a national disaster and developed the National Aids Strategic Plan (2006 - 2011). Through UNAIDS (Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS), Lesotho has received \$7.3 million in the fiscal year 2009 for essential HIV/AIDS programs and services. Ms Komome remains positive that through this assistance, it will help all those affected by HIV/AIDS.

During the High Commissioner's First Official Visit to Western Australia, Ms Kokome called on the Governor of Western Australia, the Lord Mayor of the City of Perth, the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Western Australia,

and Deputy Leader of the Opposition. The High Commissioner also held an economic briefing by the Department of State Development and by the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Western Australia, and met with the Australian Africa Business Council.

We both shared a common background as teachers before becoming involved in public life. Ms Kokome has a large area to cover in South East Asia and is based in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.



Picture: (from left) High Commissioner and the First Secretary, Mr Sixakeko Yengane, the High Commissioner for the Kingdom of Lesotho, Her Excellency Ms Ntsebe Kokome, and the President of the Legislative Council, Hon Barry House.