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“The Growing Crisis of Africa’s Orphans”

Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Bass, and Members of the Committee,
Thank you for inviting me to testify on the Department of State's response to
orphaned and vulnerable children in Africa.

The Department of State is committed to supporting children in adversity around the world, including orphaned and other vulnerable children. This work is accomplished through the Department’s diverse program activities, diplomatic engagement, and policy development and engages the expertise and capacity of multiple Department offices and bureaus. At the outset, I wish to make clear that the State Department does not isolate African orphans in its advocacy for children in adversity, nor does the Department relegate its concern only to Africa. All regional bureaus, many functional bureaus, and the leadership of the Department are focused on this; it is high priority. And we closely coordinate this work with USAID and many other U.S. agencies. Allow me to focus on some of the most prominent issues children in Africa face, including AIDS, trafficking, and conflict, and how we are working here in the Department and with our colleagues at USAID to help address these issues.

It's estimated that there are 17.8 million children that have lost one or both of their parents due to AIDS, and 90 percent of those live in sub-Saharan Africa. PEPFAR is addressing the needs of orphans and vulnerable children (OVC) through programs that mitigate the social, emotional and economic impacts of HIV/AIDS on children and reduce their risk and vulnerability while increasing their resilience. These programs have kept children in school, maintained children in supportive family environments, kept children safe by working with governments to promote child welfare system strengthening (including prevention of child abuse, GBV, and social protection), and reduced barriers to HIV and health and nutrition services, to

name a few. Over the last four years, more than five million children worldwide have been supported by PEPFAR OVC Programs.

Second, conflicts in the Central African Republic, Chad, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Cote d'Ivoire, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, and Uganda have provoked an increase in the number of children recruited or used as child soldiers. We take very seriously the issue of unlawful recruitment and use of children as soldiers in government armed forces or government-supported armed groups as the department is responsible for producing a list of these governments as mandated by the Child Soldier Prevention Act (CSPA). In accordance with the CSPA, we continue to work with African governments to address child soldiers in their countries, including by encouraging the signing and implementation of joint action plans with the UN Special Representative of the Secretary General for Children and Armed Conflict (UNCAAC). We also support the work undertaken by UNICEF to demobilize, disarm and rehabilitate former child soldiers; this year alone UNICEF has secured the release of 1,000 child soldiers in the Central African Republic. We have seen that these action plans can be effective -- the actions taken by the Government of Chad to remove children from its ranks resulted in a verification mission undertaken with UNICEF last summer and fall, finding no child soldiers within the ranks of the Chadian National Army. Chad was subsequently not listed this year on the CSPA list or the Annual Report by the Secretary General on Children and Armed Conflict.

I have also seen first-hand how engaging with former child soldiers can make a difference. When I visited Liberia with Deputy Secretary of State Heather Higginbottom in June, we met former child soldiers who had formed non-governmental organizations and had created small businesses to help themselves and others re-integrate into society. One stressed the importance of healing, behavioral change and economic opportunities, which underscored to me how cross-cutting this issue is. Grassroots African efforts like this -- people helping people -- need to be encouraged and supported.

Third, we know children can be vulnerable to international and domestic human trafficking, whether through sex trafficking, forced child soldiering, or forced labor. AIDS orphans, including those from Swaziland and Lesotho, are particularly vulnerable to exploitation. Children throughout the continent are exploited in domestic servitude, forced begging, and forced labor in a variety of sectors, including mining, fishing, cattle herding, and harvesting coffee or rice. Armed conflict and other instability, poor economic conditions, food insecurity, rural poverty, and lack of social safety nets can also leave children vulnerable

trafficking in Africa. Our embassies in Africa don't just report on trafficking, they aggressively engage with governments and civil society, pressing for anti-trafficking laws to be passed, for governments to prosecute traffickers and for protection of victims of trafficking, especially child victims.

Protection is a critical component of the USG "3-P" strategy for fighting trafficking in persons – prosecution, protection, prevention. Both the Africa Bureau and the Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons fund victim assistance programs that are designed specifically to respond to the comprehensive needs of child victims of trafficking. Beneficiaries are provided with safe and secure shelter, medical, paralegal, psycho-social counseling, and educational support. Furthermore, continuity of care is provided through ongoing case management and economic reintegration assistance to reduce the risk of re-trafficking.

One of the pillars of the U.S. Action Plan for Children in Adversity is strengthening families. When efforts to keep families together fail, domestic and international adoption may be one way to help children who have lost parents. Orphans constitute a large, vulnerable population in Africa, and it is important for us to ensure that they are adopted in an ethical and transparent manner in accordance with international norms. This is why we work with our Bureau of Consular Affairs to encourage countries to join and implement The Hague Adoption Convention to further ethical and transparent inter-country adoptions. Moreover, we have encouraged countries to align their child welfare systems and adoption practices with Convention standards.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Mr. Chairman, through a range of activities the Department of State works to support education, security, social and child welfare systems; to provide humanitarian assistance; and to develop capacity for governance, rule of law, and the protection and advancement of human rights across the globe. There are so many ways for us to help children in Africa, and it is important for us to work collaboratively to address the issue with a survivor-centered approach: lobbying countries for laws to protect them, supporting efforts to implement those laws, and establishing protective services in conjunction with civil society. We look forward to continuing our work with our U.S. government colleagues and this subcommittee to address this important issue.

I would be pleased to take your questions and thank you very much.