

King gives thanks to Ottawa-based group

BY BRUCE WARD, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN DECEMBER 1, 2009



King Letsie III of Lesotho made a visit to Ottawa to speak at a Help Lesotho fundraiser on Monday night.

Photograph by: Jean Levac, The Ottawa Citizen, The Ottawa Citizen

King Letsie III of Lesotho wore a business suit, not regalia befitting a ruler, and his message of gratitude to those behind the Ottawa-based agency Help Lesotho was profoundly humbling.

"Under the current unfavourable economic and financial climate one would expect support for charitable activities to wane, but you have stood by Help Lesotho through thick and thin, and therefore we wish to thank you for your unwavering support and solidarity," he told about 200 people gathered at the University of Ottawa to mark the fifth anniversary of Help Lesotho.

"The projects under the auspices of Help Lesotho are of particular importance because they are located in the rural hinterland, and are targeted at needy and disadvantaged people, particularly children and the elderly."

He said the volunteers, some of whom were in attendance, could "attest to the positive impact on the lives of the beneficiaries."

The landlocked nation in southern Africa has been devastated by HIV/AIDS. About 40 per cent of Lesotho children have been orphaned as a result of the disease.

In five years, Help Lesotho has raised \$3.6 million. More than 5,000 people in the tiny kingdom are benefiting from its programs.

"In contrast to some of the bigger development endeavors with huge budgets, Help Lesotho activities are clearly visible on the ground."

The organization has twinned 15 schools with Canadian counterparts from coast to coast and arranged the sponsorship of 250 orphans and vulnerable children by families and individuals in Canada and the United States. As well, it pays the school fees of another 150 children, and has put 16,000 through gender-education training in an attempt to increase the cultural value placed on women.

"All these interventions have given hope to children and communities who otherwise would continue to wallow in despair and hopelessness," he said.

Help Lesotho has also contributed to the fight against HIV and AIDS by arranging testing for children, youth and teachers.

"The impact of this disease has been devastating to our economy and has resulted in the unprecedented increase in the number of orphaned children."

Although Help Lesotho has achieved much in only five years, "a lot remains to be done," the king said. "There is still a need to deepen and widen its coverage to include other deprived rural communities."

All stakeholders will "have to continue to show resourcefulness and dedication" for Help Lesotho to continue to meet "its objectives with efficiency."