

February 28, 2001

OPEN LETTER TO THE PEOPLE OF MAURITIUS

As my term of office as U.S. Ambassador to Mauritius draws to a close, I would like to take this opportunity to sum up my impressions of your country and its relations with the United States of America.

First, my wife Joan and I have loved every moment we have spent representing our country in this wonderful place. Since our arrival the Mauritian people have welcomed us with open hearts.

The greatness of Mauritius is its people, whose potential is unlimited. Yet I am surprised to hear Mauritians express doubts as to their country's future, referring to their nation as "just a small island" or "only a little country." My response is, look at what you have accomplished and what you are achieving. Leadership comes in all sizes. Big is as big does. "Little" Mauritius carried the ball for all of Africa in lobbying my country for the Africa Bill.

Thirty-three years ago when you gained independence Mauritius was a sugar mono-economy on isolated islands which experts thought had no prospect of self-sustainment, much less economic success. You have clearly proved the experts wrong.

You have succeeded by educating your people, and today you have the highest literacy rate in Africa. You succeeded by encouraging free enterprise and entrepreneurship, and today you have the highest per capita income in Africa. You succeeded by believing in and practicing democracy, through which elections are peaceful, government transitions smooth, human rights respected, family values encouraged, and the rule of law is paramount. Mauritius today is a model for the rest of Africa. Your democratic accomplishments were recognized last year with your election to the UN Security Council.

You also proved the experts wrong by creating a high-end tourism industry second to none. You succeeded in finding your niche in the world textile market by bringing in leading manufacturers and developing your own global competitors. You succeeded by creating a thriving offshore sector based on quality banks and carefully screened clients. And now you have your sights set on the "New Economy" of telecommunications and information technology. Looking at your track record and commitment, I have no doubt you will succeed in this endeavor as well.

Mauritius' small size does not limit your capabilities for achievement. On the contrary, your size keeps you nimble and prepared to take advantage of opportunities. You are more able to modify policies and change direction than countries with larger populations. You are much more capable of finding and exploiting niches in new economic sectors, as you did with textiles and tourism.

The Africa Bill offers countless such opportunities. While the focus in Mauritius has been mostly on the textile portions of the bill, the legislation provides for much more. Close to 2000 new products now enjoy duty-free quota-free treatment. Some of those products, such as watch components, are already being manufactured here. The Africa Bill also creates venture capital funds that will reach \$2 billion or more. Mauritian investors, thanks to their regional business experience are well positioned to access these funds for investments here and throughout the region. Mauritian businessmen are already amongst the largest investors in Madagascar, and have significant investments in Mozambique and Tanzania.

The American corporate sector has significantly increased its interest in doing business with Africa. Mauritius is ideally positioned to act as the principal gateway for American trade and investment with Africa much as Hong Kong does for China, and Singapore for Southeast Asia. The success of the American Regional Trade Fair, held here last April, demonstrates Mauritius' attraction. It was the largest trade fair ever put on by the U.S. Department of State in Africa. Over 200 American companies participated, and over 60,000 visitors from at least fifteen different countries attended. Millions of dollars worth of business was done at the America Fair, and millions of dollars worth of deals followed directly as a result of contacts made at the Fair.

Now, the new American Chamber of Commerce has been formed, with over 150 members joining in its first two months of existence. The Chamber will serve as a vehicle to facilitate business between Mauritius and the United States, and to promote Mauritius' role as a regional gateway. We did not make the America Fair and the American Chamber success stories. You did, because Mauritius means business.

While Mauritius is well-known in Europe as an exotic tourist location and as the producer of high-quality apparel, few Americans have ever heard of you. Mauritius has a great story to tell and an American audience ready to listen. I am encouraged by the initiative of the Minister of Tourism, Air Mauritius and other sector leaders to pool their resources to fund a public relations campaign in the United States that will make American business people, tourists and consumers aware of Mauritius and its myriad qualities.

We have done our share to raise this country's profile, by bringing former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and Larry Hagman here, by staging the American Regional Trade Fair, and by encouraging American companies to visit Mauritius and discover what you have to offer. During my tenure over a dozen major American firms opened regional offices here. While the U.S. Embassy will continue to play a role, the primary responsibility for attracting American trade and investment rests with Mauritius.

In terms of the future, I hope you will continue to concentrate on education, focusing particularly on information technology and business. Steven Covey, one of

America's leading business consultants, counsels that everyone should start each day assuming that their education is obsolete. With the constant changes occurring in technology and in the world economy, this guidance becomes more and more trenchant. As Ambassador, I have donated over 50 computers to NGO's and community centers. We are also expanding our educational advising services. This year alone there are over 300 Mauritians studying in American universities, and we helped them obtain over 86 million Rupees (\$3.2 million) in scholarships.

It is also my hope that you will strive harder to teach your people English, as it is the first language of business worldwide. For Mauritius to take full advantage of the global economy, it must be able to communicate in the language of business. Yet leaders throughout the education field tell me that English language ability is declining. Intensive English training should start when students are young and best able to learn multiple languages. One of Mauritius' chief attractions, its distinctive competence that distinguishes it from all other African countries, is its bilingual and even multi-lingual character. Cultivate this distinctive competence and you will profit greatly.

Another one of Mauritius' distinctive features is its marvelous blend of cultures and religions, the way in which it encourages diversity in unity. Please continue to celebrate all of your visual arts, crafts, music, dance and other art forms. It would be an irredeemable loss should you let preservation of your national roots and cultures take a back seat to progress and prosperity.

The same holds true with respect to preservation of the environment. I applaud the Government's recent efforts to crack down on those who litter the island. However, it takes more than Government action to keep a country clean; all citizens should be proud to be environmental policemen. Mauritius is a jewel, and like all jewels must be continuously polished to reveal its true shine.

I leave Mauritius with a fullness of heart and a sense of gratitude for what I have learned from your people, cultures and religions. As we return to our home in North Carolina, my wife and I will take with us fond memories of the great honor bestowed on us in being a part of "America's Team" in Mauritius. I look forward to becoming an ambassador of good will for Mauritius in the United States.

Sincerely,

Mark W. Erwin

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