

Botswana applies for development package from China

29th March 2016



By Mpho Tebele

Gaborone – Botswana has revealed that it has applied to benefit from China’s US\$60 billion development package earmarked for Africa, making it perhaps the first African country to do so, three months after the Chinese President Xi Jinping pledged US\$60bn to development in Africa, during the Forum on China Africa Cooperation in South Africa, in December 2015.

Botswana’s application was confirmed by Foreign Affairs Minister Pelonomi Venson-Moitoi said, who told parliament this week that the Botswana government has submitted projects for possible benefit under the package. Venson-Moitoi did not elaborate on the projects for which the government is seeking funding from Beijing.

The Chinese development package is into 10 areas that include infrastructure projects, aid for drought-stricken countries and thousands of scholarships for African students. The Chinese government has also promised to cancel outstanding debts for Africa's least developed countries in the form of zero interest loans that mature at the end of 2015.

At the Forum on China Africa Cooperation in South Africa, Xi pledged US\$60bn to development in Africa, as part of what Chinese and African leaders called "win-win cooperation". With about US\$3.5 trillion in foreign currency reserves, China's state owned banks have for some time been looking at Africa for investment opportunities.

The package is meant for Africa's development over the next twelve months and was announced by Chinese President Xi Jinping during the second Forum for China/Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) Summit held in Johannesburg, South Africa in December 2015.

Venson-Moitoi said relations between Gaborone and Beijing have been strengthened in recent years and said Botswana's quest for more Chinese funds to bankroll its development projects would be met with approval by the Chinese.

"The Forum on China-Africa Cooperation is yet another cooperation mechanism that the Chinese government has extended much needed support to Botswana and Africa as a whole. Under this framework, we have seen enhanced political exchanges and cooperation between China and Botswana at all level," she said.

She said China contributes considerably to the development of Botswana and expressed the hope that this status quo will continue.

Venson-Moitoi was responding to a question by MP Sethomo Lelatisitswe who had asked that Parliament be appraised on Botswana's current relations with the Asian giant.

Recently Gaborone and Beijing were involved in a diplomatic spat after Botswana condemned the Asian country for flexing its muscles in a dispute over claims to the South China Sea.

But Venson-Moitoi defended Botswana's stance saying many countries view Botswana as a beacon of peace and stability and as such when the country talks, the world

listens.

"We have achieved a lot in 50 years that a lot have not achieved. Botswana has achieved a lot since independence and as such when we talk the world listens.

"But we never talk outside diplomatic channels. People are saying we should have a codified foreign policy but we say we cannot do that because the world around us is not rigid," she said.

She refuted claims that Botswana has rubbed China the wrong way when it made a statement with regard to their recent South China Sea conflict saying, "China is amongst Botswana's most favoured nations."

Venson-Moitoi said building strong relations with other countries means being free to advice applaud and question their actions.

"Let me once again re-affirm that the relationship between Botswana and the People's Republic of China is excellent and mutually beneficial. This relationship dates back to the formative years of Botswana's independence," she said.

"As a result of this cordial relationship, our two countries are actively working together as true friends and strategic partners to further advance their bilateral cooperation for the betterment of our two countries and peoples," said the minister.

She said since the establishment of diplomatic relations between our two countries in 1975, there has been extensive and fruitful cooperation in various fields of development. Since then, China has continued to offer Botswana development and technical assistance in various fields.

"To this end, we have witnessed increasing cooperation over the years, particularly in the areas of infrastructure development, health, education, agriculture, science and technology, culture, and military cooperation.

"Our two countries' resolve to strengthen and broaden the scope of bilateral cooperation has been evidenced by the establishment of the Botswana/China Joint Consultative Forum, which was first hosted by Botswana in October 2012.

"This bilateral consultative mechanism is critical as it provides the invaluable platform to discuss issues of bilateral, regional and international discourse," said Venson-Moitoi.

She reminded Parliament that In June 2015, she had an opportunity to undertake an official visit to the People's Republic of China, where she had productive discussions with her counterpart and other high level authorities in China, including a courtesy call on the Vice President of the People's Republic of China.

"My visit which was in the context of our bilateral consultative mechanism is a testimony of the long standing and excellent relations that subsist between Botswana and the People's Republic of China."

"I wish to underscore that Botswana's relations with China remain solid and I am confident that this mutually beneficial partnership, will continue into the future and I hope that this puts paint to the suspicions of the naysayers," said Venson-Moitoi.