

STATEMENT BY SUZAN D. JOHNSON COOK

Nominee to be Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom
Senate Foreign Relations Committee

November 17, 2010

Mr. Chair and Members of the Committee,

Thank you for this opportunity to appear before you today.

I am truly grateful for your consideration of my nomination by President Obama as United States Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom. I am deeply honored by the trust that President Obama and Secretary Clinton have placed in me to serve our nation in advancing the right to freedom of religion abroad. As President Obama so eloquently stated in his historic speech at Cairo University last year, "Freedom of religion is central to the ability of peoples to live together," and, "People in every country should be free to choose and live their faith based upon the persuasion of the mind and the heart and the soul."

I am similarly persuaded in my mind, heart, and soul that religious freedom is the birthright of all people everywhere; it is a foundation of civil society, it is a key to international security, and it must always be a pillar of U.S. foreign policy. Religious freedom is a universal principle, enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank my family and extended family, who are here with me, for their sacrifice, love, and endurance.

I have had the opportunity to travel to five continents to engage Muslims, Catholics, Orthodox Christians, Protestants, Jews, and practitioners of several other spiritual traditions. I have traveled to Zimbabwe and South Africa to meet with Zulu faith leaders to promote religious freedom and tolerance. I worked with World Vision, in Ruschlikon, Switzerland, in its efforts to combat global poverty. I have also led interfaith delegations to Israel, Jordan and Egypt, and throughout the Caribbean. As a young woman, I worked with Operation Crossroads Africa, and participated in a cross-cultural exchange with many spiritual groups in Ghana. Each of these experiences has uniquely shaped my approach to interfaith engagement, and has provided lasting touchstones that continue to guide and inspire my commitment to promoting religious freedom globally.

Being a Black American has been formative in the development of my interest in religious freedom issues. Members of my race did not enjoy full religious freedom in this land for centuries, and religion was used by many to justify slavery and segregation. In my travels around the country and around the world, I have found that my experience as an African American woman has enabled me to identify with other minority communities. For instance, following the attacks of 9/11, as the Chaplain for the New York City Police Department, I was

called upon to aid many citizens from the Muslim community who had been targeted because of their religious affiliation.

America has learned much from its experience with religious diversity and it is critical that we share our lessons, stand with the persecuted, and encourage all governments to respect and protect the universal rights of all people.

I want to acknowledge and commend the efforts of the two previous Ambassadors at Large, Robert Seiple and John Hanford. Both embraced the mandate of the IRF Act and were responsible for overseeing the growth of the Office of International Religious Freedom in the Department of State. If confirmed, I pledge to build on their efforts as I advance this congressional mandate and President Obama's vision of enhanced U.S. attention to issues of religious freedom and interfaith engagement.

Today, Secretary Clinton and Assistant Secretary Michael Posner will be rolling out the annual International Religious Freedom Report to Congress. This Report closely examines the status of religious freedom in 198 countries around the globe. If confirmed, I will work to continue the high quality of these reports, which are a tremendous resource that I will draw on - if confirmed - to engage governments and societies on the importance of respecting and protecting religious communities and safeguarding the right of all individuals to believe or not to believe.

I have learned important lessons and wisdom from each of my experiences, and if confirmed to serve as Ambassador at Large, I will seek to work with all religious groups. And I will work with human rights organizations, think tanks, universities, media partners, foreign governments, and, of course, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom. This mission is too important to be left to one official or one office at the State Department.

If confirmed I especially look forward to working closely with Congress. Our legislative branch plays an indispensable role in this fight for freedom, and I know you and your colleagues share my commitment to shine a spotlight on violations of the right to religious freedom and to take appropriate US Government responses when this right is violated. Thank you again for considering my nomination and I look forward to answering any questions you may have.