

Opening Statement of Dr. John Nkengasong
Nominee for Ambassador-At-Large for Global Health Security and Diplomacy
Senate Foreign Relations Committee
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Chairman Cardin, Ranking Member Ricketts, and Members of the Committee, it is an honor to be with you today as the first nominee to serve as Ambassador-At-Large for Global Health Security and Diplomacy at the Department of State.

I come before you today at a pivotal time in our country's and the world's security. As we navigate the current crises in Ukraine, the Middle East, and the ever-evolving challenges with China, one of the greatest threats to our national and global security is the next potential global pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic taught us that we are more connected and more vulnerable than we ever thought. In fact, within just a few weeks, the COVID-19 virus had spread to 165 countries. More than 1 million Americans have tragically lost their lives and the U.S. economy has suffered over 14 trillion dollars in damages from COVID-19 alone, which is more than twice the amount of our annual federal budget.

We also know that health threats are becoming more frequent and more severe. The number of disease outbreaks from zoonotic spillover – that means animal to human disease transmission like Ebola, mpox, and Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza – is increasing roughly 5% every year. 1 million people are estimated to have died due to anti-microbial resistance in 2019 and these deaths are predicted to overtake the deaths due to cancer globally by 2050. The growing climate crisis, ongoing rapid movement of people, and increasing risks of misinformation and disinformation are all creating the conditions for a more challenging response to future disease threats at home and abroad.

U.S. leadership matters now more than ever. Our ability to collaborate, coordinate, cooperate, and communicate with other countries, including those with whom we often disagree, will be what protects us when the next global health security threat emerges.

And as the world's leading global health donor through our annual investment of more than 10 billion dollars per year in lifesaving programs, including the PEPFAR program, we have a unique role in using a combination of our diplomacy and foreign assistance to ensure the world is better prepared to respond to health threats.

Two decades ago, under President Bush and with the support of Congress, the State Department assumed leadership of PEPFAR to address the HIV/AIDS pandemic. In August 2023, Secretary Blinken, in close collaboration with Congress, established the Bureau for Global Health Security and Diplomacy.

This Bureau brings together our collective global health security assets across the State Department organized around the core mission of:

- 1) One, leading diplomatic engagement on global health security,
- 2) Two, leveraging and helping to coordinate U.S. foreign assistance while promoting international cooperation on health threats,
- 3) Three, elevating global health security as a top national security and foreign policy priority across our missions in 195 countries around the world.

Since the Bureau's August 2023 launch, we have already made tremendous progress. We continue to sustain the progress in the fight against HIV/AIDS and accelerate the response to one of the world's most significant health security threats across 55 countries. Congress's bipartisan reauthorization of PEPFAR has enabled us to save up to 25 million lives and reaching a record 20.47 million people on lifesaving HIV treatment, with a plan to reach 23 million by the end of 2025.

The Bureau has demonstrated success in leveraging the PEPFAR platform to address other health security threats including outbreaks of Ebola, Marburg, and the ongoing mpox outbreak in Central Africa.

The Bureau is also able to tap into the full power of our diplomatic teams across the State Department to elevate HIV/AIDS as a political priority and sustain our gains – I look forward to working with this committee – in continued strong bipartisan fashion – to pass a clean five-year PEPFAR reauthorization in 2025.

As part of our diplomatic leadership on global health security issues, last year I assumed the role as primary U.S. representative to the Pandemic Fund designed to strengthen pandemic preparedness capacities of the most vulnerable countries around the world. I recently chaired the Pandemic Fund's strategy committee, and the strategy will be launched later this month, aimed at addressing critical gaps in pandemic preparedness capacity globally.

To embed health security in our foreign policy, the Bureau launched the Foreign Ministry Channel for Global Health Security in March. This group of 18 countries has committed to working together on establishing strong early warning systems, countering mis-and-disinformation, and enabling access to critical medical countermeasures during health emergencies.

I conclude by reminding this committee of one central truth, it is not a question of "if" a new health threat will emerge – it is a matter of "when." U.S. leadership is critical and the Bureau stands ready to lead diplomatic efforts in support of these goals. Thank you, Chairman Cardin, and Ranking Member Ricketts, and I look forward to your questions.