

**Opening Statement of Robert Forden
Nominee to be U.S. Ambassador to Cambodia
Senate Foreign Relations Committee
March 7, 2024**

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member, and distinguished Members of the Committee: Thank you for considering my nomination to be the next United States Ambassador to the Kingdom of Cambodia. I am honored by the faith that President Biden and Secretary Blinken have placed in me.

If confirmed, I will work closely with Congress to advance U.S. interests in Cambodia. I look forward to supporting the Cambodian people in their aspirations for a truly independent, prosperous country that respects democratic principles, human rights, and the rule of law.

The United States is a longstanding and committed partner of the Cambodian people, and we seek to work with Cambodia's new government to advance a shared vision of a free, open, prosperous, and secure Indo-Pacific region.

We have productive bilateral cooperation on a number of important issues. Law enforcement, child protection, education, cultural preservation, public health, and POW/MIA accounting are some of the bright spots in our bilateral relations. Our two countries also continue to work together on regional and global issues, such as the full range of ASEAN cooperation, the Mekong-U.S. Partnership, condemnation of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and implementing DPRK-related UN Security Council resolutions.

While we have worked well together in these areas, there is still much work to do in others. Cambodia has regressed from a flawed, but functioning, democracy to a state of governance that has little tolerance for dissent. There have been many setbacks concerning human rights and democratic practices, including the conviction for "treason" of political opposition leader Kem Sokha and the imprisonment of U.S.-Cambodian citizen Seng Theary and union leader Chhim Sithar.

It is my belief that Cambodia's new generation of leaders offers an opportunity to improve the country's international standing, including by restoring genuine multi-party democracy, ending politically motivated trials, and allowing independent media outlets to reopen and function without interference. If confirmed, I will make advancing respect for human rights and multiparty democracy a central focus of my work.

The United States has serious concerns about the intent, nature, and scope of construction at Ream Naval Base, as well as the role the PRC military is playing in this process and in the future use of the facility. The United States will continue to support efforts to maintain and preserve Cambodia's sovereignty.

Our experienced and professional U.S. Mission staff in Phnom Penh – both American and locally employed staff – are dedicated to defending U.S. national interests and strengthening the U.S.-Cambodia relationship. If confirmed, I will prioritize their safety and security, work to invest in

their professional development, and do my utmost to ensure that the resources provided by American taxpayers are used efficiently and effectively to advance U.S. interests. I would be honored to lead and facilitate our team's efforts throughout the Kingdom.

On a more personal note, it has been a life-long dream for me to contribute to building a strong relationship between the people of the United States and Cambodia. Ever since I was a young college student, I watched as my mother served as a volunteer English tutor for Cambodian refugees that were sponsored by our church. Meeting these wonderful people in our home and learning about Cambodia's rich culture and its long history – both its ancient history as well as its more recent tragic history – instilled in me a deep appreciation and fascination with that beautiful country.

Finally, I cannot conclude without thanking the people who have inspired and supported me throughout my 35-year career in the Foreign Service. My parents, Bill and Toby, watching today from their home in St. George, Utah, were tremendous role models and instilled in me a thirst for life-long learning and travel and a deep respect for people from all cultures and backgrounds. My father himself was a life-long public servant in the field of corrections in California and my mother was a public-school teacher and entrepreneur in the education field.

I am so proud and appreciative of my wife, Jasmine, my daughters Jessica and Emily, and my son Christopher, who have made enormous sacrifices to follow me as we moved frequently throughout their lives to live in places as diverse as China, Taiwan, Vietnam, and Israel. Without their love and support, I would not be where I am today. I am equally proud of my daughter-in-law Noelle who, like my son Christopher, is a distinguished West Point graduate currently serving our country in the United States Army.

Thank you, Members of the Committee, for your consideration of my nomination. I look forward to your questions.