

Statement of Mark L. Asquino
Ambassador-Designate to the Republic of Equatorial Guinea
Before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee
May 17, 2012

Chairman Coons, Ranking Member Isakson, Members of the Committee: it is a great honor for me to appear before you this afternoon as the nominee to be the next United States Ambassador to the Republic of Equatorial Guinea. I am grateful for the confidence that President Obama and Secretary of State Clinton have placed in me as well as for the support of Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Carson. If confirmed by the Senate, I will do my best to uphold this trust.

Mr. Chairman, please allow me to introduce my wife Jane, who is here today. We met and were married almost two decades ago in Bucharest, Romania. Jane was there as a Peace Corps volunteer, and I was serving at the U.S. Embassy. Since then, I have been incredibly fortunate to have had Jane accompany, support and inspire me, often in difficult and dangerous postings.

Mr. Chairman, I have spent more than three decades as a career Foreign Service Officer, serving in Latin America, Europe, Asia and Africa. Presently, I am the Executive Assistant and Chief of Staff in the Office of the Under Secretary for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights. There I supervise a staff of eighteen foreign and civil service employees who work on these crucial issues. I have served in countries including Spain and Romania, which were in transition to democracy, as well as in oil rich nations such as Kazakhstan and Sudan. During my most recent overseas assignment as Deputy Chief of Mission in Khartoum, I focused on human rights abuses in Sudan. The knowledge and experience I've

gained in such postings have resulted in my deep commitment to advancing democracy, human rights, and transparency.

Today I would like to speak to you briefly about the three major U.S. foreign policy issues that form the cornerstone of our bilateral relationship with Equatorial Guinea.

The first issue is good governance and democracy. Equatorial Guinea, with a population of fewer than one million people, is located in west central Africa's Gulf of Guinea. Although the country is nominally a multiparty, constitutional republic, President Obiang Nguema's Democratic Party of Equatorial Guinea controls all but one seat in the one hundred member legislature. Equatorial Guinea is the third largest producer of oil in sub-Saharan Africa, and has one of the highest per-capita income rates in Africa. Despite this, much of its population lives below the poverty level; and official corruption is widespread, in a country that needs to spend more on the health and educational needs of its citizens.

Equatorial Guinea was unsuccessful in meeting the requirements to become compliant with the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI). However, it is considering applying once again, and we are encouraging this action. Meeting the conditions to become an EITI candidate country would be one positive signal by the Government of the Republic of Equatorial Guinea (or, GREG) that it intends to improve its fiscal transparency through revenue reporting.

In regard to the welfare of its people, the GREG has invested in major public works projects that are improving the country's infrastructure, and it is also funding public health programs that have lowered the infant mortality rate and dramatically reduced the incidence of malaria. These are encouraging steps, and if

confirmed, I will urge the GREG to devote more attention to transparency and governance and continue to invest in its people.

The second issue is the protection of human rights. In 2010 and 2011, following calls from the United States and the international community, the GREG released a significant number of its political prisoners. The GREG in recent years has also made modest progress in improving prison conditions and providing human rights training for its security forces.

While Equatorial Guinea has taken measured actions to improve its human rights record, major problems remain. These include arbitrary arrests, and restrictions on freedom of the press, assembly, and association. Since the 2008 visit of the UN Special Rapporteur for Torture, at the invitation of the GREG, Equatorial Guinea has partnered with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) to speak out against torture and call for the prosecution of human rights abusers. One notable advance, the 2011 signing of a residency agreement between the ICRC and the GREG, culminated this year with the opening of ICRC's fully functioning and fully staffed office in Malabo.

In addition, the GREG has announced it will revive the Interagency Commission on Trafficking in Persons created to enforce its 2004 Trafficking in Persons Law. The government has requested Embassy Malabo's technical assistance on how best to structure the commission. This is the first time in recent history that the GREG has taken the initiative to request assistance to prevent human trafficking, which is a major problem in Equatorial Guinea. The government deserves credit for such positive actions, but Equatorial Guinea must do more to promote respect for human rights.

The third issue is U.S. national security, especially access to energy resources. During 2003-2006, I served as Deputy Chief of Mission at the U.S. Embassy in Kazakhstan. There I worked to protect the commercial interests of U.S. oil companies that were major oil consortium partners. With close to 14 billion dollars invested in Equatorial Guinea, U.S. oil companies are Equatorial Guinea's largest investors, and they have the lead role in oil and gas exploration and extraction. The U.S. presently imports approximately 12% of its oil from African nations in the Gulf of Guinea. For this reason, our country has an abiding interest in the maritime security of this vital, economic zone.

If confirmed, I will focus on this issue, as well as on the security and well-being of the 500 U.S. oil company employees and other American citizens in Equatorial Guinea. I will also be a strong advocate for U.S. commercial interests.

Mr. Chairman, if confirmed, I will give these three issues, governance, human rights, and national security interests, my utmost personal attention and energy. While our dialogue and engagement with Equatorial Guinea needs to respect its sovereignty and traditions, we also must be frank in discussing our concerns in each of these areas. If confirmed, I promise to work closely with you and the Members of this Committee.

I thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. I would be pleased to answer any questions you may have.