

**Statement of Cynthia Akuetteh
United States Ambassador-Designate to the
the Gabonese Republic and the
Democratic Republic of São Tomé and Príncipe
Senate Foreign Relations Committee
December 17, 2013**

Madam Chair and Members of the Committee: It is an honor to appear before you today. I am truly grateful to President Obama and to Secretary Kerry for the confidence that they have placed in me as their nominee for Ambassador to the Gabonese Republic and the Democratic Republic of São Tomé and Príncipe. If confirmed, I will be honored to work with you and other Members of Congress to protect and advance U.S. interests in Gabon and São Tomé and Príncipe.

Most of my career has focused on Africa, beginning with my time with the Peace Corps as a staff member, to my recent tour as Deputy Assistant Secretary in the Africa Bureau. If confirmed, I look forward to serving our nation again in Africa, a continent full of promise, opportunity, and challenges.

I would not be where I am today without the endearing love and support from my family and I would like to introduce my family members who are here today:

Gabon is a stable country and an active partner of the United States. U.S. policy priorities are clear: (1) deepening security cooperation, especially in the maritime domain; (2) strengthening Gabon's democratic processes; (3) enhancing

trade and economic opportunities that benefit both countries; and (4) assisting Gabon in the protection of its unique and incredible natural heritage and biodiversity. Our objectives align well with initiatives the Gabonese are undertaking under President Bongo Ondimba's "Strategic Plan for an Emergent Gabon."

Gabon sits on the strategic Gulf of Guinea, an important source of U. S. oil imports. Gabon is the sixth largest oil producer in Africa and the U.S. is a major market for Gabonese oil exports. If confirmed, I will work closely with the Gabonese government to promote security in this vital region. In August, Secretary of the Navy Raymond Mabus had a very productive visit to Gabon, where he met with President Bongo Ondimba and the Defense Minister. As a result, we have sent a Navy assessment team to assist Gabon in a review of its maritime forces that could inform the future the development of a comprehensive maritime strategy.

The professional development of the Gabonese security forces, including law enforcement (gendarmerie) and peacekeeping, continues to be an important priority. If confirmed, I will work closely with the Gabonese government, as well as the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) to promote regional stability and civilian protection. ECCAS, headquartered in Libreville, has been instrumental in the establishment of peacekeeping operations in the Central

African Republic. To that end, I will stress to the leadership the importance we place on respect for human rights, accountability and transparency, and I will enforce implementation of the Leahy law.

Democratization, good governance, and transparency continue to be top U.S. priorities. Gabon has been historically a stable country. But, Gabon is emerging from four decades of stagnant development and rule by a single president. Since he took office in 2009, President Ali Bongo Ondimba, in contrast to his long-serving father, has moved to streamline and modernize Gabon's ailing and entrenched bureaucracy that resists undertaking reforms and inhibits economic growth and development. President Bongo Ondimba has appointed policy experts, published an economic development plan, and begun to enforce administrative procedures.

President Bongo Ondimba has reversed Gabon's long-standing non-aligned policies and strongly supports U.S. objectives on many critical international issues. In 2011, Gabon was removed from the Tier II Watch list for Trafficking in Persons due to its efforts to arrest traffickers, enhance legislation, and protect victims. If confirmed, I will continue to engage the government to do more to halt transnational crime, including the trafficking of persons. I will also continue to engage leaders from the government, opposition parties, and civil society to

increase respect for human rights and protection for fundamental freedoms, and further strengthen Gabon's emerging democracy.

On the economic front, we are pushing for the further opening of Gabon's market to U.S. trade and investment. For example, we have worked with the government to ensure Gabon's tendering process in the oil sector is as fair and transparent as possible; and that U.S. firms are given full and fair opportunity to participate in the development of the hydrocarbon industry. We are also helping Gabon diversify its economy through support for U.S. investment in other sectors, such as infrastructure development and education. These are sectors in which U.S. firms and educational institutions are already active.

Gabon is a country committed to environmental conservation. For several years USAID, through its Central Africa Regional Program for the Environment (CARPE), has partnered with Gabon. In addition, we also partner with Gabon through the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to strengthen the capacity of Gabon's Parks agency. This helps Gabon to administer its national parks and other protected areas and combat wildlife crimes that often go hand-in-hand with illicit trafficking of arms, gems, people and weapons. U.S. Marines and Navy teams have trained a unique unit of combined Gabon Parks and gendarmes (military police) to secure Gabon's remote, forested frontier areas from criminal elements. Gabon is an important partner in the Congo Basin Forest Partnership (CBFP), a

U.S. initiative involving the public and private sectors and is a key African platform for addressing a host of regional issues. Some of the more notable issues include: stemming deforestation, combatting wildlife trafficking, assuring economic livelihoods, and cooperation for climate change mitigation. If confirmed, I will continue to advance our shared work on environmental stewardship.

Let me now turn to the other country to which I am nominated to serve as Ambassador, São Tomé and Príncipe (STP). An island state, it is the second smallest in size as well as one of the poorest countries in the world. São Tome has a vibrant political scene but severe budgetary constraints have hampered the progress of democracy. U.S. national interests are served by São Tome's strategic location in the Gulf of Guinea and its respect for democracy. To further strengthen regional cooperation, the U.S. provides military assistance and training for security forces in São Tome. As with Gabon, following the successful visit of the Secretary of the Navy to Sao Tome in August, the United States will send a team to assist Sao Tome in the development of a comprehensive maritime security strategy. If confirmed, I will continue to work with São Tome to improve its port security through cooperation with the U.S. Coast Guard; and to strengthen regional security and improve bilateral trade links with the United States.

And, most importantly, if confirmed, no goal will be more important to me than protecting the lives, interests and welfare of Americans living and traveling in Gabon and São Tomé and Príncipe. I look forward to leading and fostering the development of the dynamic embassy team that we have in Gabon, which includes the first deployment of six Marine Security Guards since 1994.

Madam Chair and Members of the Committee, if confirmed, I look forward to serving as the next U.S. Ambassador to the Gabonese Republic and the Democratic Republic of São Tomé and Príncipe.