

Statement of Patricia Mahoney
Nominee to be U.S. Ambassador to the Republic of Benin
Before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations
November 14, 2018

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member, and Distinguished Members of the Committee:

I am deeply honored to appear before you today as President Trump's nominee to be the next Ambassador to the Republic of Benin. I am grateful for the confidence the President and Secretary of State Pompeo have shown in me, and I wish to thank the Members of the Committee for the opportunity to testify before you. I would also like to thank my children: Brian, who is a submariner serving with the U.S. Navy; Kevin, a U.S. Army veteran now at George Mason University; and Honora, who is in Indonesia training for service as a Peace Corps Volunteer. Their patience, support, and good humor have sustained me throughout my career.

It has been my great privilege to serve our country as a Foreign Service Officer for the past 28 years. If confirmed, I look forward to continuing that service by working with you and other Members of Congress and staff to advance U.S. policy and to strengthen our bilateral relationship with Benin across a range of shared interests, including democracy and human rights; economic prosperity; and security. Benin stands out as one of our most steadfast partners in a region increasingly important to our strategic and economic interests, but it is also one of the poorest. Improving the prospects and well-being of its people is vital to ensuring that Benin continues on a democratic, tolerant, and stable path, and the United States has proven a reliable partner in helping Benin do so. If confirmed, I will work with the team at Embassy Cotonou to promote a vibrant civil society and effective, transparent governance; support a prosperous, open and healthy society with closer, mutually beneficial trade linkages with the United States; and work in partnership with Benin to strengthen regional peace and security. I would like to highlight briefly a few priorities in each of these realms.

First, promoting democracy and governance: A multiparty democracy since 1991, Benin has built a tradition of peaceful transition of power across six presidential elections, and it is proud of its long tradition of religious tolerance. Benin's President, Patrice Talon, recognizes corruption and ineffective public administration as among the country's biggest problems. If confirmed, I expect to witness Benin's seventh consecutive peaceful, democratic presidential election in

2021, in addition to legislative elections to be held next spring. I will work with the Government of Benin to advance its efforts to increase the transparency and effectiveness of government institutions, including a well-functioning, independent, and fair judicial system.

Benin has advanced its efforts to counter human trafficking, resulting in an upgrade to Tier 2 in the 2018 Trafficking in Persons report. If confirmed, I will work with the Government of Benin to build on this progress to confront all forms of human trafficking, in particular increasing its efforts to investigate, prosecute, convict, adequately sentence traffickers of adults and children, and develop effective systems to identify trafficking victims and provide them with care.

Second, improving the well-being and economic prospects of Benin's growing population: Nearly 40 percent of Benin's people live below the poverty line. Two-thirds of Benin's population lacks access to electricity. The birth rate is the 13th highest in the world; malaria is the leading killer of children under five. Democracies thrive best when their people thrive. If confirmed, I will do my utmost, working with our Embassy, Congress, and U.S. agencies to continue to support Benin in creating the conditions necessary to move beyond aid and to achieve self-sustaining economic growth, allowing the Beninese people to achieve a healthier and more prosperous future for themselves and their families.

This work is already underway. The United States is strengthening Benin's electricity sector through a five-year \$375 million Millennium Challenge Corporation compact. We expect nearly 10 million Beninese to benefit from this program.

The U.S. Agency for International Development is reducing the number of Beninese lives lost to malaria and improving the health of mothers and children; building the foundations of a healthy, productive workforce; and contributing to a 17 percent reduction in mortality of children under five since 2014.

Food security initiatives supported by the U.S. Department of Agriculture are feeding schoolchildren and helping to strengthen Benin's agriculture industry.

More than 2,150 Peace Corps Volunteers have served in Benin over the past 50 years. While American private investment and bilateral trade in Benin are limited, many of the most notable success stories -- a cashew processing company, a palm liquor producer, and a baobab-based export company -- have links to former Peace Corps projects.

The United States has a modest but positive trade balance with Benin. If confirmed, I will work to strengthen mutually beneficial trade and investment ties between our two countries.

Third, strengthening regional security: Benin is a strong partner to the United States for peace and security in West Africa and the Sahel. Our shared values are reflected in Benin's commitment to stand with its neighbors to confront the horrors of Boko Haram and ISIS West Africa, and in its contribution of troops and police to United Nations peacekeeping efforts in Mali and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Benin is also making strides in preventing the spread of violent extremism by building community resilience along vulnerable border regions. Our military and law-enforcement cooperation advance Benin's ability to counter the spread of terrorism and transnational organized crime across the Gulf of Guinea and the porous borders of West Africa that threaten American as well as Beninese interests.

Through continued cooperation with Benin, we can help the nation and people of Benin reach their full potential and advance our partnership on peace and security goals. Mr. Chairman, if confirmed, I will continue to work to reinforce our bilateral relationship with Benin, advance U.S. interests in Benin, and ensure the safety of American citizens.

Thank you for the opportunity, Mr. Chairman, to appear before you today. I would be pleased to take any questions.