

Statement of Eric Benjaminson
Ambassador-Designate to the Gabonese Republic and the
Democratic Republic of Sao Tome and Principe
Senate Foreign Relations Committee
Tuesday, July 13, 2010

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

It is an honor to appear before you today. I am truly grateful to President Obama and to Secretary Clinton for the confidence they have placed in me as their nominee for Ambassador to the Gabonese Republic and the Democratic Republic of Sao Tome and Principe. If confirmed, I will be very pleased to work with you and other Members of Congress to protect and advance American interests in Gabon and Sao Tome and Principe.

I would like to introduce my wife, Paula Benjaminson, in her own right a fine artist, an accomplished former diplomat, and the better angel of our partnered natures.

Gabon is a stable country and a proactive partner of the United States. In January 2010, Gabon began a two-year term on the UN Security Council as a non-permanent member, and shares our views on many issues. Already, Gabon has worked closely with the United States and the international community on key issues like the June 9 Iranian sanctions. In the African region, Gabon hosts the Economic Community of Central African States (French CEEAC), which is responsible for the Central African component of the African Union's stand-by peacekeeping force. If confirmed, I will work closely with CEEAC, the Gabonese leadership, and with the U.S. interagency to ensure that we together contribute to security in the Gulf of Guinea and Central Africa.

Supporting democratization, good governance and transparency are top U.S. priorities, and conditions have improved for advancing these goals under Gabon's new government. Upon taking office in October 2009, President Ali Bongo Ondimba faced a moribund economy, an anemic bureaucracy, a society marked by sharp disparities in wealth, and corruption rife throughout the country. President Bongo has initiated positive government reforms, which potentially could improve efficiency and reduce corruption, and if confirmed, I will encourage these efforts.

On environmental issues, Gabon is an important partner in the Congo Basin Forest Partnership (CBFP) and is a productive voice on climate change issues. The

Congo Basin Forest Partnership is a showcase of U.S. conservation leadership that has succeeded far beyond our expectations in terms of focusing the world's attention on the region's rich and diverse forest ecosystem. Gabon is a key partner in this initiative.

Let me now turn to the other country to which I am nominated to serve as Ambassador, Sao Tome and Principe (STP). An island state, it is the second smallest and one of the poorest countries in the world. STP experienced a vibrant political scene with free and fair elections, but crippling budgetary constraints have hampered the progress of democracy. U.S. national interests are served by STP's strategic location in the Gulf of Guinea and its continued democratization. STP recognizes its need for fiscal reform, and through our Millennium Challenge Corporation Threshold program, has greatly improved its tax legislation and enforcement capacity, business administrative procedures, and has significantly enhanced the security of its customs and ports. An International Board of Broadcasters/Voice of America transmission station is in STP.

If confirmed as Ambassador, no goal will be more important to me than protecting the lives, interests and welfare of Americans living and traveling in Gabon and Sao Tome and Principe. In addition, I will work with the leadership and peoples of the two nations to foster stability, support good governance and democratization, and increase economic prosperity.

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, if confirmed, I very much look forward to serving as the next U.S. Ambassador to the Gabonese Republic and the Democratic Republic of Sao Tome and Principe. I would be pleased to respond to any questions you might have.

Thank you.

