

Statement for the Record
Jo Ellen Powell
Ambassador-Designate to the Islamic Republic of Mauritania
Before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations
Subcommittee on Africa
September 22, 2010

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

I am honored today to appear before you as President Obama's nominee to be the United States Ambassador to the Islamic Republic of Mauritania. I am thankful to the President and Secretary Clinton for their trust and confidence.

Mauritania is an important bridge between the Arab and African worlds, and Mauritania's tradition of tolerant Islam resonates beyond its borders. And Mauritania's government is committed to countering extremism at home and in the region.

Nevertheless, Mauritania must overcome serious hurdles as it approaches the fiftieth anniversary of its independence on November 28. It has experienced two coups in the past five years. Just over half of its population is able to read and write. Desertification and climate change continue taking a considerable socio-economic toll on Mauritania – threatening traditional cultures and livelihoods, displacing populations, and increasing food insecurity. Arable land and water are scarce, agricultural capacity low, and chronic malnutrition elevated.

Meeting these sobering challenges will require the help of friends. Our partnership was re-energized when the U.S. restored security and development assistance after the country's return to constitutional rule following presidential elections last year. Parliamentary elections in 2011 will be a test of Mauritania's continuing commitment to democracy. If confirmed, I will ensure the Embassy not only supports free and fair elections, but an open environment for media and civil society.

Our cooperation, however, must rest upon a solid human rights foundation. Slavery and other forms of human trafficking mar Mauritania's record. Mauritania must help victims escape exploitation and vigorously enforce its laws that prohibit such practices. If confirmed, I will work with the government to improve its human trafficking record and strengthen enforcement and awareness of the country's anti-slavery law.

Since independence, corruption has held the country back. President Aziz's administration has made the fight against corruption a priority and drafted Mauritania's first anti-corruption strategy. As Mauritania tackles corruption, American investment, trade and assistance can be carried out with greater confidence. This will contribute to greater prosperity – and security – in country.

Meanwhile, the regional threat posed by al-Qaida in the Lands of the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) is real. While the vast majority of Mauritians abhor AQIM, the group has drawn new recruits into the desert. Mauritania has repeatedly demonstrated its strong commitment to combat AQIM, but requires assistance to strengthen its capabilities. The Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP) is our primary tool to support Mauritania's efforts to strengthen its counterterrorism capabilities and frustrate AQIM's recruiting efforts in the country. As a diplomat stationed in Beirut in the early 1980s, I saw first-hand the devastating impact of terrorism. If confirmed, I will energetically build upon our counterterrorism cooperation.

Finally, I am keenly aware of the Chief of Mission's responsibility for the welfare of all Americans and U.S. Government employees. As Consul General in Frankfurt, Germany, I was responsible for more than 900 personnel. I am a career Management Officer with over thirty years of experience; I will be up to the task, if confirmed, of opening up a new Embassy compound that is safe and serves to advance our strategic goals in Mauritania.

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, if confirmed I pledge to work together with you and your colleagues as we address these important priorities. I welcome any questions you may have. Thank you very much.