

James Knight
Ambassador-Designate to Benin
Senate Foreign Relations Committee
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Mr. Chairman and distinguished Members of the Committee, it is an honor to appear before you today. Thank you and the Committee for holding this hearing and inviting me to appear. I am grateful to our President and Secretary Clinton for the trust and confidence they have placed in me as their nominee for United States Ambassador to the Republic of Benin. I am especially pleased that my wife, Amelia Bell Knight, has joined me today, and given me this opportunity to acknowledge her unwavering support. She also represents our four children.

The United States and the Republic of Benin enjoy broad mutual interests and a strong relationship. If confirmed, I will do my utmost to broaden and strengthen our mutual pursuit of these shared agendas. I will mobilize the Mission's U.S. and locally-engaged staff to protect U.S. citizens and reinforce our strong partnership with the Republic of Benin.

Our shared objectives include combating terrorism, strengthening Benin's democracy, enabling effective political and economic reform, and supporting the health and welfare of the people of Benin. The United States supports economic growth in Benin through a five-year \$307 million Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) Compact; the United States Agency for International Development's health and education programs; the President's Malaria Initiative; the Africa Education Initiative; and the African Growth and Opportunity Act.

Benin has made remarkable strides toward pluralist democracy since abandoning Marxism-Leninism in 1989. Its embrace of democracy and economic reform and its focus on good governance were key to its MCC Compact signed in February 2006. The Compact will improve the lives of five million people and lift a quarter million Beninois out of poverty by 2015.

Benin is a success story. Elections since 2002 have been free and fair, and given the people of Benin a genuine voice in managing their democracy. Benin is a regional exemplar of freedom of expression, as can be seen in the proliferation of media outlets which promote public debate on issues ranging from education reform to decentralization and corruption.

Benin continues to make signal progress in health and education. It has kept HIV infection rates relatively low -- its HIV/AIDS infection rate is less than two percent.

These are notable successes, but difficult challenges remain. Poverty continues to breed corruption and crime, smuggling, and trafficking in persons. If confirmed, I will support Benin's efforts to address these challenges, which also threaten the national interests of the United States.

The Government of Benin recognizes that a poor investment climate and an anemic private sector are key impediments to sustainable economic growth and prospects for individual prosperity. If confirmed, I will maintain our efforts to support Benin in addressing these issues, especially through its MCC Compact. Benin's MCC Compact addresses access to land, financial services, justice, and markets. In particular, the 'access to markets' element of the MCC compact will improve the competitiveness of the Port of Cotonou.

Development assistance to Benin provided through the U.S. Agency for International Development focuses on civil society; national health capacity, including HIV/AIDS prevention; primary education; and trafficking in persons. Education programs promote better teacher training, higher enrollment of girls, and technical assistance for the Education Ministry. USAID has implemented a comprehensive program to confront child trafficking. If confirmed, I will seek to enlarge our efforts in these domains.

Benin has begun to fight gender-based violence by modernizing the family code's provisions for rights and responsibilities of men and women in marriage, divorce, children, and inheritance, as well as new landmark sexual harassment legislation. I look forward to buttressing the Women's Justice and Empowerment Initiative, inaugurated in 2007. This Initiative, supported by USAID and the U.S. Department of Justice, targets violence against women; over 100,000 Beninois have joined public-awareness meetings, and thousands more have been reached through broadcast messages. Nearly a thousand victims of gender-based violence have been provided legal and psycho-social counseling and medical care. If confirmed, I will work with Beninois to continue to educate public officials and citizens about women's rights.

Our Peace Corps' vibrant program in Benin responds to national priorities for education, environmental awareness, community health, HIV/AIDS, private sector development, and gender equity. Peace Corps Benin's program complements efforts of local and international partners working in these domains. Our Peace Corps volunteers implement additional programs where they are assigned, often in partnership with other organizations. For example, USAID and volunteers work together in many communities to combat malaria, and Peace Corps and Population Service International partner to provide HIV/AIDS education to youth. The vitality and impact of the Peace Corps in Benin is underscored by its ongoing strength and commitment to the communities of Benin. Senator Isakson followed the investigation of the murder of Peace Corps volunteer, and Georgia constituent, Catherine Puzey in March 2009; the Government of Benin's quick response to this tragedy has been commendable. If confirmed, I will continue our support for the Government of Benin's investigation and its effort to bring Ms. Puzey's murderers to justice.

Benin is an exceptional security partner for the United States. International Military Education and Training (IMET) programs reinforce civilian control of Benin's military and development of professional, apolitical security forces that assure Benin's domestic stability and its support for international peacekeeping. Benin was one of the first Africa Contingency Operations Training and Assistance (ACOTA) partners; IMET and ACOTA programs allowed Benin to participate effectively in peacekeeping operations in Cote d'Ivoire, Liberia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Haiti. Benin currently contributes nearly 1400 personnel to peacekeeping operations worldwide and is an active participant in the U.S. Navy's Africa Partnership Station program. If confirmed, I will seek to further widen our security cooperation with Benin.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and distinguished Members of the Committee, for this opportunity to address you. If confirmed, I look forward to representing the interests of the people of the United States in Benin. I look forward to your questions.