

Statement of
Ambassador-designate to Tajikistan
Kenneth E. Gross, Jr.
Senate Foreign Relations Committee
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Mr. Chairman, Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. I am honored to be President Obama's nominee to be the next U.S. Ambassador to Tajikistan, and I am grateful to the President and to Secretary Clinton for their confidence in me. I look forward, if confirmed, to having the honor to represent U.S. interests in Tajikistan and to work with Congress in pursuit of these goals.

The relationship between Tajikistan and the United States is an important one. Tajikistan works closely with the United States and its allies to bring about stability in Afghanistan and the region. It has the potential to contribute to economic development in Afghanistan and Central Asia. Though Tajikistan's commitment to democratic values must be strengthened, the United States can play a key role in helping these standards develop and become a model for the region.

If confirmed, this will be my second opportunity to serve in Tajikistan. From 2002-04, I was the Deputy Chief of Mission at our Embassy, and I am already acquainted with many of its leaders and foreign policy. President Rahmon has been a strong and consistent supporter of international efforts to bring about stability and prosperity in Afghanistan beginning with Operation Enduring Freedom. More recently, the Tajik Government agreed to allow the United States use of its territory as part of the Northern Distribution Network for commercial transit of non-lethal cargo to Afghanistan.

In 2007, the United States completed the construction of the Nizhny Pyanj Bridge across the Pyanj River between Afghanistan and Tajikistan. Designed to increase trade opportunities and cooperation between Tajikistan and Afghanistan, the bridge has become an important link between these two countries. In the past year, \$58.7 million in commerce traversed the bridge, a substantial increase from \$5.9 million in 2006 when only a ferry was available. Since then, Tajikistan has increased its trade and security cooperation with Afghanistan, including offering joint training for military and law enforcement staff. Since November 2008, the Tajik Military Institute trained 30 Afghan officers. Tajikistan has agreed to participate in joint training for Tajik and Afghan border guards at a U.S.-funded

facility in Khorog near the Tajik–Afghan border. Cooperation will continue this year with the U.S. constructing the National Border Guard Academy in Dushanbe. The U.S. is building a commercial customs terminal at the Nizhny Pyanj Point of Entry that should be completed by spring or summer 2010. Seventeen border guard facilities will be constructed or refurbished to better patrol and manage the border with Afghanistan. If confirmed, one of my goals will be to increase cross-border cooperation.

Tajikistan is the poorest of the former Soviet republics, and its brutal five-year civil war following independence only deepened its economic troubles. As many as one million Tajiks work abroad, mostly in Russia and Kazakhstan, and send home upwards of \$2 billion each year, including \$2.6 billion in 2008. Tajikistan depends heavily on these remittances, and according to World Bank data, as a percentage of Gross Domestic Product (GDP), Tajikistan was the top recipient of remittances in the world in 2006 and 2007 with remittances equal to 52% of GDP. Unfortunately, the global financial crisis caused remittances to decrease significantly in 2009, and it is estimated that remittance flows to Tajikistan will decrease by 30% this year due to the impact of the crisis on the Russian construction industry and other employers of Tajik migrant labor. Because 2008 was a record year for remittances, the true impact of reduced remittances on Tajikistan's economy is just starting to become visible and will need careful monitoring.

There is no easy solution to Tajikistan's economic woes. It needs to reform its laws for conducting business, and serious efforts must be undertaken to combat corruption to make the investment environment more attractive to investors. Tajikistan's agricultural sector is mired in a Soviet-era one-crop mentality, driven by cotton production. The country must diversify and provide more opportunities for farmers and help with food security for the Tajik people. Tajikistan also is plagued by energy shortages, particularly in the winter months, and it must reform its energy sector to increase accountability, transparency and improve resource management. The United States is funding projects on agricultural reform, regional energy management, improvements in the investment climate, and the improvement of regulations for small and medium businesses. Our work in health and education is important to develop and protect the next generation who Tajikistan will need to develop its economy. If confirmed, I intend to focus U.S. attention on helping Tajiks institute these reforms.

Tajikistan is in a tough neighborhood. Its lack of resources, coupled with its sputtering economy and the presence of destabilizing elements in the region,

provide the potential for the rise of extremism. Besides economic reforms, democracy must also be developed so that Tajikistan's people have a greater say and share in their country's development. U.S. assistance to strengthen democracy, promote the rule of law, and combat corruption at all levels helps reduce the likelihood that Tajik citizens will succumb to extremist influences prevalent in the region. However, the threat of extremism should not be a guise for the violation of human rights, such as freedom of religion and expression.

Democracy in Tajikistan is only slowly moving from being an indistinct, theoretical concept to becoming an ethos for the Tajik Government and its people. Tajik citizens' contact with the United States and its democratic principles is extremely limited, particularly given the lack of access to Western media sources and U.S. citizens. If confirmed, I pledge to work to increase the number of participants in exchange programs and to bring the Peace Corps to Tajikistan to offer more Tajik citizen interaction with U.S. citizens at all levels. Parliamentary elections will take place in Tajikistan in February, and in the lead-up to this election there will be an opportunity for the United States and others to help Tajikistan further develop democratically.

Finally, I would like to assure the Committee that I understand the importance of the U.S. Embassy's role in Tajikistan. Talented people on the Embassy team work far from home in often severe conditions. The Embassy is fortunate to have equally talented local staff who play an important role in maintaining institutional continuity. If confirmed, I look forward to working closely with representatives from all the agencies serving at the Embassy to further our policy interests.

I pledge to promote and protect with energy and enthusiasm U.S. interests in Tajikistan, should I be confirmed. I sincerely appreciate the opportunity to appear before you and would be pleased now to answer your questions.