

STATEMENT OF AMBASSADOR-DESIGNATE
MARI CARMEN APONTE
BEFORE THE SENATE FOREIGN RELATIONS COMMITTEE
WEDNESDAY, MARCH 17, 2010

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee,

It is an honor and a privilege for me to appear before you today as President Obama's nominee to be the Ambassador of the United States to the Republic of El Salvador. I am deeply grateful for the trust and confidence that the President and Secretary of State have placed in me to serve at this pivotal time in the relationship between our country and El Salvador.

The analytical and problem solving skills I acquired in my training as a lawyer, combined with a strong combination of private and public sector experience, and a bilingual and bicultural background have, I believe, prepared me well to fulfill the President's call to serve. If confirmed, I will bring to the position more than 30 years of private sector and government experience. As a White House Fellow during the Carter Administration and through years of work with the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico I have learned the value of persuasion, strategic thinking, and consensus building. Likewise, my time in the private sector, particularly as the director of the Oriental Group, provided me with

extensive experience in carefully managing considerable financial resources to ensure they provide a consistent return on investment. My background in the private sector has also prepared me to better understand and respond to the needs and concerns of U.S. businesses operating in El Salvador. If confirmed, these skills will aid me carrying out our foreign policy mission, while paving the way for what I hope will be a strong working relationship with this Committee.

As you are aware, El Salvador is one of our closest partners in the Western Hemisphere, promoting democracy and human rights at home, maintaining its commitment to free markets, and supporting and cooperating in our efforts to combat terrorism. El Salvador is a model of post-conflict transition and is a far cry from the country that I first visited in 1987 – in the midst of a civil war. During that visit I was part of an American Bar Association team of attorneys that led capacity building workshops to help our Salvadoran counterparts in their efforts to modernize their legal system and improve rule of law. The country I visited then is decidedly different from the El Salvador of today. Since the 1992 signing of the Peace Accords that ended its bloody civil war, El Salvador has evolved into a relatively stable nation in a region that continues to face challenges to democratic governance and respect for human rights. Only two decades ago, the FMLN and the Government of El Salvador were locked in violent conflict. Last year, after 20 years of ARENA rule, the people of El Salvador witnessed the peaceful transfer of

power from an ARENA-led government to an FMLN president, something that no one could have imagined two decades earlier. Through all of this, El Salvador remains a dependable ally and partner of the United States.

Despite its achievements, El Salvador continues to experience difficult political, economic, and social challenges. President Funes has focused much of his energy on addressing the socioeconomic ills faced by El Salvador, but he faces significant challenges. Forty-eight percent of the country's population suffers from poverty, and 25 percent of all Salvadorans reportedly feel that they must migrate abroad in search of work. The global financial crisis has exacerbated El Salvador's economic difficulties, leaving many Salvadorans unemployed and many more underemployed. Even remittances from relatives in the United States, which provide a much-needed boost to family incomes, suffered an almost 10 percent reduction over the last year. The effects of Tropical Storm Ida, which killed 200 and displaced 15,000 other Salvadoran citizens, have only complicated matters. El Salvador also faces a major public safety crisis. Last year alone, homicide rates increased by 37 percent and gang-related violence and extortion rose by 43 percent. Recent press reporting suggests that violent crime continues to increase, creating a violent and chaotic situation on the ground that leaves the country vulnerable to transnational gangs (such as the MS-13), organized crime, and drug-traffickers. If confirmed, I will work with our Salvadoran counterparts to maintain

and expand cooperative intervention and law enforcement programs aimed at both preventing and combating these transnational threats, and which also support respect for human rights.

The interpersonal relations between both governments and the Salvadoran community presence in the United States fortify our solid relationship. As the members of this committee know, approximately 2.5 million Salvadorans – almost a third of the Salvadoran population – currently live in our country, and they are making increasingly important contributions to both El Salvador and the United States. Through remittances, Salvadorans in the United States not only send financial support to their families abroad, but they also transfer and reinforce American values of democracy and good governance. Their acceptance of these core values is just as evident in the contributions that Salvadorans have made to the United States. The Washington, DC area is a prime example, with four elected officials in state governments who have their roots in El Salvador. Ana Sol Gutiérrez and Victor Ramírez of the Maryland House of Delegates, Walter Tejada of Arlington County's Board of Education, and Will Campos of the Prince Georges County Board of Supervisors all are examples of success stories from the Salvadoran community.

President Obama, Secretary Clinton, and Assistant Secretary Valenzuela have articulated a set of interconnected goals for advancing U.S. interests in the Western Hemisphere that can be grouped under three core objectives:

- 1) Creating social and economic opportunity for our peoples;
- 2) Ensuring the safety of our citizens; and
- 3) Building effective institutions of democratic governance and accountability.

If confirmed, I will diligently work to assure that our current policy towards El Salvador is aligned to achieve these objectives. As Assistant Secretary Valenzuela noted in his comments before this Committee, “It will take sustained, high-quality U.S. engagement that is based on mutual respect and partnership to make this vision a reality.” President Funes has both publicly and privately asserted that the Salvadoran people desire and need such a relationship with the United States. He and President Obama reinforced this view of that relationship at the White House on Monday March 8, and at follow-on meetings with both representatives of both houses of Congress. I am confident that those of you who have met President Funes and his team agree that continuing to engage with his government is the way to proceed. If confirmed, I will make the most of this opportunity.

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, I thank you for the opportunity to appear before you and look forward to your questions.