

**Statement of Maria Otero, Under Secretary of State for Democracy and Global Affairs-  
Designate Before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee**

**June 25, 2009**

Thank you, Madam Chairwoman, and distinguished members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

It is an honor and a privilege to appear before you today. I am deeply grateful to President Obama for his trust and confidence in nominating me to be Under Secretary of State for Democracy and Global Affairs. If confirmed, I look forward to working with our superb Secretary of State, Hillary Rodham Clinton, with the members of this Committee, and with other members of the Senate and the House of Representatives, in helping to advance our mutual goals of promoting a more peaceful, prosperous, and stable world.

The responsibilities of the Under Secretary of State for Democracy and Global Affairs are significant and humbling. Should I be confirmed, I will oversee the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor; the Bureau of Oceans, Environment, and Scientific Affairs; the Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration; the Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons; and the Office of the Science and Technology Advisor to the Secretary.

The common thread that unites this vast portfolio is that the people who are most directly affected by these issues are those who are among the world's most vulnerable populations – the poor and the excluded. Refugees, trafficking victims, activists who are persecuted for demanding democracy and respect for basic human rights, people who lack access to clean water or must make tradeoffs between environmental degradation and economic survival, people without access to food security or the education and health care that modern science and technology can deliver – these are all people on the margins of society, or citizens of a government that is not delivering on its responsibility to its people.

President Obama and Secretary Clinton recognize that it is in our national interest to help governments better protect and assist their excluded populations. Exclusion and marginalization erode basic human dignity and can create an environment for violence and instability. The President and Secretary also recognize that we, as the United States of America, with our blessings of freedom and prosperity, have a moral responsibility to lend a helping hand to those who are still struggling to reach these goals. In his recent speech in Cairo, the President reaffirmed his commitment to supporting nations that protect universal human rights, and transparent, accountable government. He pledged our support for helping leaders ensure that their citizens benefit from access to education and innovation, including science and technology to improve health care and advance sustainable development.

Under this Administration, we have an important new opportunity to elevate global issues in the Department of State. I am deeply impressed by the tremendous talent and expertise of our Civil Service and Foreign Service officers serving in the global issues line. Their technical, substantive, and diplomatic skills bring critical value-added in shaping our foreign policy, and I share Secretary Clinton's view that we must capitalize on their expertise as we shape the new "smart power" tools of diplomacy and development. Tools such as science, health, and humanitarian diplomacy, combined with targeted assistance programs, are powerful agents for change: they can promote global partnerships, improve the lives of people who would otherwise be marginalized, open new relationships, or repair ones that have been damaged. At the same time, cooperation in addressing issues such as climate change or preventing pandemics benefits directly our own citizens, as these challenges know no boundaries.

If confirmed, I will work diligently with my colleagues at the Department of State, and will collaborate actively with USAID and other U.S. government agencies, to ensure that the line of global issues is integrated fully into our bilateral relationships and multilateral engagement.

Should I be confirmed, I will also bring to the leadership of the global issues family a unique perspective. My expertise in the field of microfinance over several decades, across several continents, has demonstrated to me the transformative power of giving people the tools to help themselves – the very essence of "smart power." As President and CEO of ACCION International, I have witnessed thousands of cases where individuals who were given a chance to realize the smallest entrepreneurial vision were able to contribute to their families, their communities, and their societies as a whole.

But perhaps more importantly, I saw the need to develop sustainable local institutions with the capacity to provide that opportunity. In 1992, ACCION played a key role in creating the first commercial, regulated, licensed for-profit microfinance bank - Banco Sol, in Bolivia. It was the first bank of its kind to make very small loans to the poor, and its success inspired the creation of all those that have followed in its wake. I bring this belief in the importance of institution-building to my nomination as Under Secretary, where, if confirmed, I would work to build the capacity of governments and civil society to help themselves.

Let me be clear, however, that while the line of global issues can benefit from a development perspective, this would in no way lessen our focus on supporting democracy and human rights. Giving people greater options and opportunities can reduce the risk that they will become prey to traffickers, or be forced into accepting degrading living or working conditions. But supporting democracy and human rights also means holding governments accountable to their responsibilities to respect minorities, to protect the freedoms enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, to ensure equal access to justice, and to respect the will of the people in determining who will lead them. Democracy is more than just free and fair balloting on election day. It is a vibrant civil society with the freedom of assembly, association and free speech; an open media and unrestricted access to information and ideas; political pluralism; religious freedoms; the equitable application of rule of law; and institutions of government that are transparent, responsive, and accountable. Democracy and human rights are at the core of our foreign policy goals, and to the values we hold as a nation, and, if confirmed, I will work to ensure that they remain central to our decision-making.

In closing, I want to acknowledge the key role that this committee has played in effectively addressing and resourcing the important issues that will fall under my responsibility, should I be confirmed. I value your commitment to these issues, and your thoughtful advice. As Secretary Clinton has said, “Our smart power approach will rely on partnerships, and that begins with our own government.” If confirmed, I look forward to building a fruitful partnership with the committee and Congress.

Thank you for your consideration, and I look forward to your questions.