

**STATEMENT OF MICHELE J. SISON
AMBASSADOR – DESIGNATE TO LEBANON
SENATE FOREIGN RELATIONS COMMITTEE
July 23, 2008**

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, it is a great honor to appear before you today as President Bush's nominee to be the U.S. Ambassador to Lebanon. I have served in Beirut as Charge d'affaires ad interim since February of this year.

I would like to express my sincere appreciation for the extraordinary decision made by Chairman Biden to agree to Secretary Rice's request that I be sent to Lebanon to serve as Charge d'affaires pending agrément and ahead of these Senate confirmation hearings. If confirmed, I look forward to working with this committee, interested members of Congress, and other Americans to represent the American people and to continue to advance U.S. goals in Lebanon.

I have served our country as a Foreign Service Officer since 1982. Over the past 26 years, I have done my very best to represent the United States in a series of challenging assignments in Haiti, Togo, Benin, Cameroon, Cote d'Ivoire, India, Pakistan, and most recently, as the U.S. Ambassador to the United Arab Emirates.

As a first-generation American, I am especially proud to represent our country abroad. I am profoundly grateful for the opportunities and the many privileges that our great nation offers its citizens. Also, I'm pleased today to introduce my sister, Vicki Sison Morimoto, and her family – Miles, Michiko, Andy, and Emiko – who drove up from North Carolina to be here this afternoon. I also want to recognize my two daughters, Alexandra and Jessica. The girls are college students and out in Flagstaff, Arizona this summer, but are real Foreign Service troopers, having been raised in West Africa, India, Pakistan, and the United Arab Emirates.

Mr. Chairman, the U.S. has important interests in Lebanon—interests that I will work hard to advance if confirmed. Lebanon is at the forefront of U.S. efforts to promote democracy, protect human rights and freedoms, and to combat extremism in the Middle East. Lebanon has undergone seismic changes over the past several years, from the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri and subsequent Cedar Revolution of 2005, to the devastating July 2006 war and the ensuing political stalemate that ended only this May 2008 with the Doha Agreement, election of President Michel Sleiman, and subsequent formation of a national unity government headed by Prime Minister Fouad Siniora on July 11.

We should remember that it was the Lebanese themselves who took to the streets in 2005 to end Syria's occupation and demand a sovereign, democratic state free from foreign interference. The Lebanese people also called on the international community at that time to investigate Prime Minister Hariri's assassination and related crimes through the United Nations International Independent Investigation Commission and the Special Tribunal for Lebanon.

One concrete measure of U.S. support for the Lebanese people's aspirations for a democratic, sovereign, prosperous, and stable Lebanon is our robust U.S. bilateral assistance program. Since 2006, the U.S. has committed over one billion dollars to help Lebanon strengthen its state institutions and to rebuild, reform, and realize its economic potential. With these funds, the U.S. is training and equipping the Lebanese Army and the Internal Security Forces to support their deployment throughout Lebanon to provide security for the Lebanese people. As we saw in May of this year, Hizballah and other illegal armed groups continue to threaten the peace and security of the Lebanese people and their neighbors in contravention of UN Security Council resolutions. If confirmed, I will work closely with the Lebanese government to strengthen the Lebanese Armed Forces and the Internal Security Forces to ensure that Lebanon, and thereby the region, is more stable and secure.

The United States must continue to strengthen the forces of the Lebanese state – the Lebanese Army and the police (the Internal Security Forces) – so that Lebanese citizens may enjoy prosperity, peace and security. Both of these institutions had languished under Syrian occupation, receiving very little in the way of training and equipment. When the Lebanese government took the momentous decision in 2006 to deploy its army to southern Lebanon for the first time in 40 years and displace Hizballah from the Israeli border, troops traveled in civilian vehicles because they lacked trucks, communicated via cell phone because they lacked radios, and slept in tents because they lacked permanent shelter. When LAF troops battled Fatah al-Islam militants in the Nahr al-Barid refugee camp in 2007, they faced the difficult challenge of modifying aging helicopters to drop bombs because they lacked proper close air support assets. Our assistance to the LAF is helping to address these needs for basic and more advanced equipment as well as training. Meanwhile, our assistance to the ISF is helping to create a credible police force capable of taking on new missions including security inside Lebanon's refugee camps. If confirmed, I will work closely with the Lebanese government to further strengthen these institutions to ensure that Lebanon – and thereby the region – is more stable and secure.

U.S. bilateral assistance also funds a variety of programs, ranging from judicial reform to education to entrepreneurial skill-building and support for civil society and electoral law reform. Such U.S. engagement can do much to help the Lebanese people realize their dreams of a sovereign, prosperous, and democratic state. While the U.S. has a number of critical interests in Lebanon, my highest priority, if confirmed, will be the safety of the dedicated men and women serving under my leadership, both American and locally engaged Lebanese staff, as well as the safety of all Americans living, working, or traveling in Lebanon. Each day at U.S. Embassy Beirut, my staff and I pass the Embassy's memorial to the 337 American and Lebanese colleagues who have lost their lives working on behalf of the United States Government in Lebanon since 1976. We all serve in their memory and in their honor.

If confirmed, I will do my best to be worthy of the trust placed in me by the President, Secretary Rice, and the U.S. Congress to advance American interests and to protect American citizens. I fully understand that I will be answerable to you and to the American people in this regard.

Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, I want once again to express my sincere appreciation for this opportunity to address you. If confirmed, I look forward to seeing you and your staff members in Beirut. I would welcome any questions you might have for me today. Thank you.

