

Testimony of Virginia Palmer
Ambassador-Designate to the Republic of Malawi
September 11, 2014

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Flake and Members of the Committee:

It is a great honor and privilege to appear before you today as President Obama's nominee to serve as United States Ambassador to the Republic of Malawi. I appreciate the confidence the President and Secretary Kerry have placed in me by putting my name forward for your consideration. I am also deeply grateful for the support of my husband and fellow Foreign Service Officer Ismail Asmal, my daughters Aliya and Nadia Asmal, and my parents Richard and Becky Palmer.

If confirmed, I look forward to working with this Committee and Congress to advance U.S. interests in Malawi, including strengthening its democratic institutions, encouraging economic diversification, and building its health and education capacities.

I most recently served as Deputy Chief of Mission to the Republic of South Africa. There, I helped manage one of the largest U.S. missions in Africa. Since joining the Foreign Service in 1986, I have served as the Department's Director for Economic Policy in the Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, as the Economic Counselor at Embassy Nairobi, and as a political officer at Embassy Harare — positions in which I promoted democracy and encouraged economic growth and better governance. If I am confirmed, I will draw on these experiences to lead our team in advancing U.S. interests in Malawi.

During its first three decades as an independent country, Malawi was a one-party state. Since 1994, when the people of Malawi voted in their first

democratic, free, and fair elections, Malawi has undergone peaceful transfers of power among political parties. When former President Bingu wa Mutharika died unexpectedly in 2012, principled leaders demanded and achieved a constitutionally correct succession – a triumph for Malawi. Malawi’s 2014 elections marked another democratic milestone for Africa. In the election of President Peter Mutharika, power again peacefully and democratically passed from one party to another. Despite these successes, there still is work to be done. If confirmed, I will work to further develop democratic processes and strong governing institutions in Malawi. I look forward to supporting priorities shared by the United States and Malawi of improved public financial management, civil service modernization, reduced corruption, and increased government transparency and accountability.

A major U.S. government priority in this nation of 16 million persons, with a per capita GDP of only \$226 dollars, is to encourage private-sector driven, sustainable economic growth. As a member of the New Alliance for Food Security, Malawi has committed to improving its investment climate and to expanding its markets. Our Feed the Future program, which focuses on crop and nutritional diversification, value addition, and enhanced trade, is directly supportive of the New Alliance, and strengthens Malawi’s resilience and food security. Our \$350.7 million Millennium Challenge Account Compact will expand access to electricity and encourage private sector investments through infrastructure rehabilitation and energy sector reforms. If confirmed, I look forward to advancing this objective.

Our broad economic engagement in Malawi is complemented by our strong commitment to health and education assistance, vital to building Malawi’s human capacity. Nearly sixty percent (\$153 million) of the United States’ \$257 million in assistance to Malawi in FY 2013 went to combat HIV/AIDS and other diseases. If

confirmed, a priority for me will be to maximize the effectiveness of the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief program (PEPFAR) in Malawi. Malawi can only achieve its full potential if it enjoys improved basic education. If confirmed, I will be proud to lead the United States' support to bolster the quality of primary education – a \$20 million annual investment – to promote literacy and encourage children, and particularly girls, to stay in school.

Malawi maintains outstanding security cooperation with the United States. Malawi has been a peacekeeping partner in the State Department's Africa Contingency Operations and Training Assistance (ACOTA) program since 1998. Four battalions of ACOTA-trained Malawian peacekeepers deployed to Côte d'Ivoire in 2012 and 2013 and two battalions deployed to the Democratic Republic of the Congo in 2013 and 2014. In 2013, Malawi hosted Epic Guardian, the largest counterterrorism exercise on the African continent, with 1,000 U.S. and Malawian military, police, and civilians. If confirmed, I look forward to continuing our strong security cooperation and assistance, to advance our shared objective of supporting peace, stability, and respect for human rights in Africa.

Malawi faces significant challenges. Over forty-five percent of Malawi's population is under the age of 15, presenting daunting economic and educational challenges for the Malawi government, as it strives to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). In addition, Malawi has a nearly eleven percent adult HIV prevalence rate and a very high degree of risk for major infectious diseases. U.S. partnership is integral to combatting these problems so Malawi can keep moving toward achievement of the MDGs.

Despite these challenges, Malawi holds great promise. Malawi is a strong partner of the United States. If confirmed, I look forward to continuing the momentum of the U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit, advancing youth leadership in programs such as the Mandela Washington Fellowship for Young African Leaders,

and working with the government of Malawi and its people on our shared goals of a healthier, better educated, more prosperous citizenry that embraces democratic values.

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, thank you again for the opportunity to appear before you today. I will be happy to answer any questions.