

## **Testimony of Karen Stewart**

### **Ambassadorial Nominee to the Republic of the Marshall Islands**

#### **Senate Foreign Relations Committee**

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, I am deeply honored to appear before you today as the President's nominee to be United States Ambassador to the Republic of the Marshall Islands. I am grateful to the President and the Secretary for their confidence in nominating me for this position, and am equally grateful to receive your consideration.

As a Foreign Service Officer, I have been privileged to serve in a varied and fascinating mix of assignments, including the honor of serving as U.S. Ambassador to the Republic of Belarus and to the Lao People's Democratic Republic. If confirmed, I will draw on the lessons learned in these assignments and my many years of regional policy experience to advance the United States' strategic interests in the Pacific.

The Republic of the Marshall Islands is a key partner in the United States' deepening relationship with the Pacific. It is an isolated, sparsely populated, low-lying Pacific island country consisting of approximately 70 square miles of land spread out over 750,000 square miles of ocean southwest of Hawaii and just north of the equator. These characteristics make it vulnerable to natural disasters and the effects of climate change. Our two nations have a close and special relationship dating back to the end of the Second World War, when the United Nations entrusted the United States with the administration of the Pacific Islands Trust Territory. In 1983, the Marshall Islands and the United States concluded the Compact of Free Association, which its people approved in a plebiscite a few months later and which entered into force in 1986 upon Congressional approval. We thus entered into a new phase of our relationship with the RMI. This Compact, which was amended in 2003 to extend greater economic assistance, provides the structure for much of our bilateral relationship. Mutual security of our nations is a core feature of the special relationship between the United States and the Marshall Islands. The RMI has no military of its own. Under the Compact, the United States has committed to defend the RMI and its people from attack or threats as the

United States and its citizens are defended. The United States also enjoys access to Marshallese ports, airports and airspace, a vital asset for our defense and security needs. The RMI hosts the U.S. Army's Ronald Reagan Ballistic Missile Defense Test Site on Kwajalein Island (known as USAG-KA). The base is the country's second largest employer, second only to the RMI government. The test site plays a significant role in the U.S. missile defense research, development, and testing network. It is used to monitor foreign launches and provide deep-space tracking and is an ideal near-equator launch-site for satellites. In February 2015, the U.S. Air Force and Lockheed Martin broke ground at the future six-acre site of the new Space Fence next-generation radar system at the base. When it comes online in 2018, Space Fence will enable the Air Force to locate and track hundreds of thousands of objects orbiting Earth with more precision than ever before, helping reduce the potential for collisions with our critical space-based infrastructure. Under the Amended Compact, the United States has access to Kwajalein through 2066, with the option to extend until 2086.

Continued access is important, but just as important is a good relationship with the Marshallese. If confirmed, I will work to maintain the strong relationship between USAG-KA and the Marshall Islands government and to promote USAG-KA's beneficial role for affiliated Marshallese communities.

The United States and the Marshall Islands also have an important economic relationship. To help achieve the Amended Compact goal of economic self-sufficiency, through the Department of the Interior, the United States will provide the Government of the RMI with roughly \$70 million a year through FY2023. Approximately \$35 million is provided in annual grant assistance, targeting health, education, public infrastructure, environment, public sector capacity development, and private sector capacity development. Priority is given to education and healthcare, including addressing the high prevalence of diabetes, heart disease and other non-communicable diseases.

Another very important aspect of the Amended Compact is a jointly-managed Trust Fund that will serve as a source of income for the Marshall Islands after annual direct grant assistance ends under the Amended Compact in FY 2023. If confirmed, I will promote outcome-oriented sustainable economic development

and strongly advocate for the wise and accountable use of our assistance to support Marshallese capacity to build a prosperous and healthy future.

Under the Amended Compact, most citizens of the RMI can live, study, and work in the United States without a visa. The Compact obliges the two countries to consult on certain matters of foreign policy. The RMI government has an excellent voting record with the United States in the United Nations, sharing our positions on many important issues, including on human rights and Israel. The RMI is also a close ally of the United States in the multilateral climate change negotiations. As one of the most vulnerable nations to the impacts of climate change, the RMI played a crucial role last December in Paris in furthering our shared goal of ensuring ambitious action by all major green-house gas emitting countries, both developed and developing, in order to reach a historic international climate agreement. If confirmed, I will continue to work collaboratively with the RMI to tackle climate challenge, and also support efforts of the U.S. Mission to further assist the RMI in adapting to the impacts of climate change.

The RMI is a vibrant democracy that conducted another successful, free and fair election just last November and recently installed a new government. In working with this new government, we will continue to look to the RMI as a reliable partner that strongly backs U.S. engagement in the Pacific and supports U.S. strategic priorities around the globe. If confirmed, I will continue the fine work of Ambassador Armbruster by working closely with the Department of the Interior, the Department of Defense, and the rest of the interagency community to strengthen a bilateral relationship based on partnership and mutual respect between the Marshallese and American people.

Mr. Chairman, in closing, I would like to emphasize that the Republic of the Marshall Islands was part of our trust territory, but is now our ally. The people of RMI are woven into the American fabric, serving with distinction and honor in our military and living and working beside us in the United States. The Marshall Islands remains a dependable partner in bolstering security in the Pacific. As the economic center of gravity shifts to the Asia-Pacific region, the importance to U.S. interests of a stable, increasingly prosperous, and democratic Marshall Islands continues to grow. If confirmed, I look forward to working with you in pursuit of that goal.

I appreciate the opportunity to appear before you today and am pleased to answer your questions.