

Testimony of Katherine S. Dhanani
Nominee for Ambassador to the Federal Republic of Somalia
March 25, 2015
Senate Foreign Relations Committee

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Markey, and Members of the Committee, I am honored to appear before you today to be considered for the position of United States Ambassador to the Federal Republic of Somalia. I am deeply grateful to President Obama and Secretary Kerry for the confidence in me they have shown through this nomination. If confirmed, I pledge to work with you to advance our interests by promoting a unified and peaceful Somalia, with a stable and representative government, that can defend its territory, foster economic development, and defend human rights.

Mr. Chairman, please allow me at this time to introduce my husband, Azim Dhanani. His support has meant everything to me as he accompanied me to assignments around the globe, and, if confirmed, I will continue to rely on him as I take up my new responsibilities.

This is a critical time in our engagement with Somalia. Decades of conflict, famine, and oppression led many to label Somalia a “failed state.” Today, Somalis are proving those pessimists wrong. There is progress in Somalia—measured but real progress,—on security, on economic development, and on the establishment of representative government. Just over two years ago, the United States officially

recognized the Federal Government of Somalia. Since that time, we have been working closely with the Somalis as they rebuild their state and lay a foundation for the future. The decision to nominate the first U.S. Ambassador to Somalia in over two decades was taken in recognition of our deepening relationship and our conviction that Somalia is on a path that will bring better times. Establishment of a permanent diplomatic presence in Mogadishu will represent the culmination of this recognition process, but there is no fixed timeline for achieving this objective. If confirmed, I will carefully monitor the security environment in Somalia as I seek to advance our diplomatic objectives, with no higher priority than my responsibility for the security of personnel under my charge.

U. S. interests in Somalia are clear. Just as the collapse of Somalia was a strain on the region, stability, prosperity, and peace in Somalia will bolster positive trends in economic and democratic development in Africa. Violent extremists exploited the past failure of governance in Somalia, to our and Somalis' detriment. We have a strong humanitarian interest in easing the suffering of two million refugees and internally displaced Somalis, in reducing the food insecurity that leaves Somalia vulnerable to famine, and in addressing the failures that place Somalia at the bottom of the list on so many human development indicators. If confirmed, I will keep these U.S. interests firmly in mind as I lead U.S.

engagement with the Somali government, the Somali people, and the international partners who share our commitment to seeing Somalia succeed.

Mr. Chairman, as referenced in the U.S. Strategy on Somalia that the State Department submitted to Congress last summer, and the subsequent January update, U.S. policy revolves around three elements: security, the political process, and development. On the security front, our top priority is degrading al-Shabaab, which has links to al-Qaida. Driving al-Shabaab from its remaining strongholds and neutralizing it as a destabilizing force are critical to open up space for legitimate governance and development opportunities. If confirmed as Chief of Mission, it will be my priority to continue our efforts to help our African partners to degrade al-Shabaab. I will continue to support the African Union Mission in Somalia—or AMISOM as it is most commonly known—until Somalis are ready and able to assume full responsibility for their own security. To that end, building the capacity of the Somali national security forces will be a top priority.

In Somalia, political and security gains must reinforce and keep pace with one another. The Federal Government has made progress establishing government institutions, negotiating relationships with regional authorities, and supporting community stabilization. However, the Somali government's institutional capacity and reach remain extremely limited. If confirmed, I will ensure that the United States, in very close coordination with our international partners, continues to

support the Somali government as it implements “Vision 2016”-- the Somali-led state-building agenda for completing a federal state-formation process, holding a constitutional referendum, and preparing for democratic elections.

As we focus on the long-term goals of establishing a sustainable federal system of governance, we must keep in focus the immediate needs of the Somali people. Tragically, Somalis continue to face a multitude of natural and man-made threats to their livelihoods and their lives. Those imperiled by al-Shabaab risk losing their land, their livestock, and their lives; those freed from al-Shabaab may still be in danger from an overall lack of security, including gender-based violence and inter-clan rivalry. Last year alone, conflict forced more than 80,000 Somalis from their homes. The food security situation continues to teeter on the brink of crisis with a million or more Somalis at risk. If I am confirmed, U.S. efforts to help address these urgent needs will remain at the forefront of our engagement.

Mr. Chairman, Somalia is moving in the right direction, but more progress is needed. Somali leaders must pull together to build their institutions, protect their citizens, and unite their country. Somalia’s neighbors and friends must assist in that effort. I can assure you today that, if confirmed, it will be my honor to restore U.S. Mission Somalia, advance U.S. interests, and strengthen our relationship with Somalia, and I look forward to the opportunity to work with the Committee to achieve those goals.