

Statement of Karen Williams
Nominee to be U.S. Ambassador to the Republic of Suriname
Senate Committee on Foreign Relations
August 22, 2018

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Cardin, and distinguished Members of the committee, I am honored to appear here today as President Trump's nominee to be the next U.S. Ambassador to the Republic of Suriname. I am grateful to the President and to Secretary Pompeo for the confidence they have placed in me. If confirmed, I pledge to work closely with the Congress to advance our nation's interests in the Republic of Suriname.

I have had the honor to serve our country for nearly 27 years as a Foreign Service Officer. I was raised with strong role models of commitment to our nation, to service, and to helping others. My father, a Korean War veteran, retired Army Master Sergeant, and retired police officer, ensured that his sons and daughter valued our nation and its ideals. My British-born mother, an avid U.S. citizen and patriot for more than 30 years, gave her children a commitment to helping others in need. I am blessed they are still with me and although age and health preclude their presence here, they are watching from home in Springfield, Missouri. I am equally blessed that a number of wonderful friends are present for the hearing.

I am fortunate to have a diverse career ranging from Afghanistan to Paraguay overseas and at Main State and U.S. Special Operations Command domestically. I am privileged to have worked alongside outstanding diplomats, development professionals, military members, and other interagency colleagues. Together in my various postings, we have utilized programs and engagement opportunities to further U.S. national security objectives such as counter-terrorism, counter-narcotics, and U.S. regional security, as well as working for a peaceful and prosperous world through building democratic institutions and supporting civic education. I am very pleased to return to the Caribbean region, in which I have gained experience pertinent to Suriname in roles as Deputy Director of Caribbean Affairs and in my time as Deputy Chief of Mission and long-serving Chargé d'Affaires a.i. to Guyana and CARICOM.

If confirmed, I will proudly represent the United States in Suriname – a peaceful and relatively young democracy that is among the most ethnically and religiously diverse in the world. It is a nation in which Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, and indigenous religions live peacefully and productively together.

If confirmed, I will work with the Surinamese government to further develop existing mutually beneficial opportunities for economic growth and increased trade, as well as explore new opportunities. U.S. companies are currently conducting oil exploration off the coast of Suriname and hope to find the same success as has occurred in neighboring Guyana. The gold fields of Suriname have also drawn U.S. companies and, in cooperation with these companies and the government of Suriname, the U.S. government is supporting efforts to curb illicit mining and the use of mercury, which not only damages the environment in Suriname, but affects mercury levels in the U.S.

Citizen security is another key mutual interest of the U.S. and Suriname and is in keeping with the goals of the Caribbean Basin Security Initiative (CBSI). If confirmed, I will also continue to support bilateral and regional assistance that provides technical training to law enforcement officers, seeks to combat money-laundering and financial crimes, and supports strengthening rule of law. Suriname is on the Trafficking in Persons Report Tier 2 Watch List for the second year in a row and while it has been making significant efforts to meet the minimum standards, there are additional steps needed. If confirmed, I also pledge to work with the Surinamese government to meet minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking in persons.

Elections are also on the horizon for Suriname. In May 2015, President Desiré Bouterse's party won a majority, and he was reelected to a second five-year term in what international observers found to be a generally free and fair election. The next general election is slated for May 2020 and campaigning has already begun. If confirmed, I will seize upon opportunities to work with the Surinamese government, civil society, and the media to again ensure free and fair elections.

If confirmed, my highest priority as Chief of Mission will be to safeguard the welfare of U.S. citizens and Embassy staff -- both U.S. and local -- to the utmost limits of my ability. If confirmed, I look forward to building the relations between our two great nations and defending and promoting the interests of the United States in the Republic of Suriname.