

**Statement of Eric P. Whitaker
Nominee to be U.S. Ambassador to Niger
Senate Committee on Foreign Relations
October 3, 2017**

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Flake, and Distinguished Members of the Committee, I am honored to appear before you as President Trump's nominee for United States Ambassador to the Republic of Niger. I deeply appreciate the confidence and trust the President and Secretary of State have shown in nominating me for this position. Thank you, Members of the Committee for your consideration, and for your ongoing attention to our relations with the nations of Africa. Specifically, I look forward to working with Congress to advance our interests in Niger.

Following service as a Peace Corps Volunteer in the Philippines, and thereafter in municipal management in city government in California, I began my Foreign Service career as a Vice Consul in Seoul, South Korea, twenty-seven years ago. I have since had the great fortune to serve in four regions of the world, including as a Leader of a Provincial Reconstruction Team in red-zone Baghdad, as a Foreign Policy Advisor to Combined Joint Task Force – Horn of Africa in Djibouti, and as a Refugee Coordinator in wartime Croatia. I have served in ten of our diplomatic posts in Africa, including Niamey, Niger, where I was Deputy Chief of Mission and Chargé d'Affaires from 2008 to 2010. I have also served as Deputy Chief of Mission in N'Djamena, Chad, to the east of Niger. My most recent assignments have been as Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary for African Affairs, and as Director of East African Affairs in the Department of State's Africa Bureau.

During my career, I have served throughout several major challenges in Africa, including conflict and military coups, refugee crises, drought and famine, and floods. More importantly, I have also witnessed noteworthy growth in democracies and economies driven by human capital. If confirmed, I will draw upon my experience to expand the strong partnership between Niger and the United States of America as we continue to work together towards our mutual goals of combating extremism throughout the region, strengthening democratic governance and respect for fundamental freedoms, and fostering inclusive economic growth and prosperity.

Despite being one of the poorest countries in the world and its having some restrictions in freedom of expression, Niger has made significant progress in developing democratic institutions and combating corruption. In 2016, as a result of this progress, Niger was approved for its first Millennium Challenge Corporation Compact. MCC and the Government of Niger signed a \$437 million compact focusing on improving water management and productivity, and strengthening market access, with the objective of improving the income and livelihoods of small-scale farmers and pastoralists, who make up the majority of the Nigerien population. If confirmed, I will work closely with the Nigerien government and civil society to continue this momentum for reform by promoting responsive democratic institutions, reliable government services, and the development of critical infrastructure.

Despite these achievements, Niger still faces great challenges. The collapse of security in southern Libya and conflict in Mali and northeast Nigeria have placed Niger at a dangerous

crossroads, as extremist groups and international criminal networks exploit porous borders and long-used smuggling routes to move people, weapons, and other contraband across the Sahel. Niger has also been a victim of terrorism from its border along the Lake Chad basin, where roughly 40 women and children were abducted in July by Boko Haram.

The United States and Niger share the common goal of countering terrorism and denying violent extremism an environment in which to take root. We are committed to supporting Niger's efforts to protect its borders, build capacity to interdict illicit goods, promote good governance and rule of law, and help return security and stability to northern Mali.

Niger has invested its limited resources in combating the scourge of extremism, and has been a leader in the international response to al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), both by providing critical support for the peaceful political process and committing a battalion of ground troops to the African-led International Support Mission to Mali (AFISMA) and to the follow-on UN Multidimensional Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA). The United States has supported these troops by providing training, equipment, and logistical support.

Niger is also a strong partner in our Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP), through which we are working together to increase security sector capacity, address underlying causes of radicalization, and amplify the voices of moderate leaders to positively influence populations potentially vulnerable to radicalization. For tactical and institutional capacity building, we are working to improve crisis response capabilities (SWAT) for Nigerien law enforcement. Current initiatives also work to build community resilience in the most vulnerable regions by working with local security actors to develop and exercise crisis response plans. In response to the growing threat by Boko Haram in 2015, the United States provided significant assistance, including armored personnel vehicles and logistical support. We also train and support our Ministry of Justice counterparts as they work to bring terrorism suspects to trial.

If confirmed, I will seek to advance our already-strong security cooperation to further our shared goal of countering terrorism in the region and addressing the underlying drivers that fuel insecurity.

On top of great security threats, Niger also continues to face serious humanitarian challenges, irregular migration issues, and persistent food insecurity. As threats spill over from neighboring Mali and Nigeria, markets have been disrupted and significant numbers of people have been displaced, sometimes hurting Nigerien livelihoods. Boko Haram and ISIS-West Africa continue to have a significant impact on the Lake Chad Basin, exacerbating the humanitarian crisis in all four countries, including Niger. Yet, despite its own serious humanitarian situation, Niger has generously opened its doors to over 57,000 Malian refugees and 106,000 Nigerian refugees. Economic and vulnerable migrants from West and Central Africa continue to use Niger as a transit country to Europe via Libya, in an effort to reach Europe. Furthermore, from Fiscal Year 2013 to date, the United States has provided over \$225 million in emergency assistance to address food insecurity and the needs of Malian and Nigerian refugees.

Recurrent shocks, including drought, flooding, and food price increases, have exacerbated deep poverty and recently resulted in food insecurity for over 1.8 million people. The United States and Niger partner across a variety of programs to address the needs of Niger's most vulnerable people. This year, USAID Administrator Green announced Niger as one of the 12 new target countries for the Global Food Security Strategy.

We also coordinate with the Nigerien government to support its innovative programs to address food security, including the "3N Initiative" (Nigeriens Nourishing Nigeriens) that empowers local communities to work together to improve agricultural productivity. Thanks to this initiative, Niger has made significant progress in its fight against land degradation and reduced the proportion of people suffering from hunger by 50 per cent since 2011. For its inclusive design as well as its significant achievements, the 3N Initiative was recently recognized with the 2017 Future Policy Bronze Award, awarded by the World Future Council in partnership with the UN Convention to Combat Desertification. If confirmed, I look forward to supporting these efforts, leveraging these investments to promote U.S. interests, and exploring new areas of cooperation.

In addition to addressing food insecurity, Niger must improve health indicators that place Niger at the bottom of most measures for wellbeing. It must generate sustainable economic growth to tackle high poverty rates. Rapid demographic growth driven by the highest fertility rate in the world threatens to overwhelm the government's ambitious plans for development. To address health indicators, USAID has selected Niger to be a Presidential Malaria Initiative country, with the aim to substantially reduce malaria's impact as the leading cause for death for children under the age of 5. In Fiscal Year 2017, the U.S. is providing \$61.5 million in bilateral development-focused assistance to Niger for programs supporting democracy, governance, health and nutrition, and agriculture.

To expand economic opportunity, Niger will need to diversify the economy, invest in infrastructure, and improve education. If confirmed, I will continue to encourage the Nigerien government to implement the economic reforms needed to attract investment and promote trade. I will also seek to build new relationships between Nigerien and American companies to create opportunities for trade that benefit both our countries.

If confirmed, I will work to ensure that our bilateral relationship remains firmly rooted in our shared vision of security and prosperity. I will endeavor to assist in partnering for a democratic and prosperous Niger that respects human rights and provides economic opportunities for all. Through this partnership, I look forward to fulfilling my priorities of protecting American citizens and interests, advancing U.S. national security interests in the Sahel, and expanding mutual understanding between our citizens.

Thank you for inviting me to appear before you today. I would be pleased to answer any questions you may have.