

Statement of Michael Owen
Ambassador-Designate to the Republic of Sierra Leone
Before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations
July 13, 2010

Mr. Chairman and Distinguished Members of the Committee,

I appreciate the privilege of appearing before you as you consider my nomination by President Obama to be Ambassador to the Republic of Sierra Leone. I would like to thank the President and Secretary Clinton for their confidence in my ability to manage America's interests in Sierra Leone. If confirmed by the U.S. Senate, I shall uphold the trust reposed in me. I am also honored to be joined here by my wife, Annerieke, as well as our daughter, Sigrid.

In the aftermath of Sierra Leone's brutal civil war, considerable progress has been made towards consolidating peace with the help of the international community -- including significant American assistance. Sierra Leone's successful democratic elections in 2007 were a strong reflection that the nation and its citizens have emerged from conflict with a commitment to democratic change. The United States also continues to support the work of the Special Court for Sierra Leone in pursuing cases against those most responsible for brutal violations of humanitarian law during that country's civil war. Sierra Leone still faces many tests on governance and rule of law. The fragile peace requires our constant attention.

Destabilizing conditions are exacerbated by the abject poverty that has spawned alarming social conditions, placing Sierra Leone third from the bottom in 2009 of the UN Human Development Index. If confirmed, I will maintain focus on assisting local governance, market-oriented small-farmer agricultural activity and education to increase employment and food security, and basic health care. I will continue also to support efforts to develop mineral resources more transparently and sustainably for broad-based economic growth. The recent return of the Peace Corps after its 16-year absence provides a symbolic and material boost to our ties.

One of the greatest threats to democracy in Sierra Leone is corruption, so if confirmed, I will strongly urge local and national leaders to actively support the Anti-Corruption Commission.

I will also make my paramount concern the safety and security of approximately 600 American citizens resident in Sierra Leone, including forty U.S. employees and their dependents at the U.S. Embassy.

I first served in Africa as a Political/Economic Officer at the U.S. Embassy in Nouakchott, Mauritania, and then as the Department's Desk Officer for Rwanda and Burundi. Later, I served as Counselor for Economic Affairs at the U.S. Embassy in Accra, Ghana, and more recently as Deputy Chief of Mission and Chargé d'Affaires at the U.S. Embassy in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. If confirmed, I will bring a thorough understanding of Africa and Africans to my position, as well as the knowledge and experience to be an effective steward of American foreign policy interests in Freetown.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee for the opportunity to appear today. You have my commitment that if confirmed, I will work tirelessly to uphold our American values and will endeavor to work with you and your colleagues in Congress to achieve this goal.

I would be pleased to respond to any questions you may have.