

**Testimony of Mari Carmen Aponte
Nominee to be Ambassador to El Salvador
Senate Foreign Relations Committee
November 8, 2011**

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee,

I am honored and grateful for the trust and confidence placed in me by President Obama and Secretary Clinton in nominating me to serve as United States Ambassador to the Republic of El Salvador.

El Salvador is a country with significant ties to the United States. One quarter of all Salvadorans live and work here in the United States. There are strong economic links between our two nations: CAFTA and the free trade that it facilitates between the United States and El Salvador, a dollarized Salvadoran economy, and the presence of many prominent U.S. companies engaged in business in El Salvador. El Salvador has also sent troops to Iraq and Afghanistan – and is the only Latin American country to have sent troops to Afghanistan. This is significant progress from twenty years ago, when a bitter 12-year civil war ended and the country began a successful transition to a stable democracy.

It is vital to continue to build on that progress with this important regional ally and, if confirmed, I will further the efforts that we have made in the last year.

The Administration's priorities and the efforts of our Mission are centered on the complementary objectives of security and economic growth. President Obama has placed a high priority on citizen security in the region and thus our number one priority in El Salvador has been, and will continue to be, security. El Salvador has one of the highest homicide rates in the world. Due to its location in the region, drug trafficking through El Salvador continues to increase. Gang violence is

endemic and a daily threat to much of the population with the activities of the 18th Street and MS-13 gangs extending to the cities and communities of America. Criminal elements in El Salvador have been linked to violent crimes committed in the U.S.

President Obama's signature development initiative, Partnership for Growth, has identified security as a binding constraint to economic growth. As part of this initiative, which has been introduced in only four countries worldwide, we are engaging the government and people of El Salvador in a dialogue on how the United States and El Salvador can work together to improve security, which represents a significant constraint to growth and prosperity in many sectors of the economy.

Partnership for Growth will enhance the way in which the U.S. manages its foreign assistance to El Salvador, better supporting USG policy interests and fostering more rapid economic growth in El Salvador. A collaborative effort, Partnership for Growth, has involved a rigorous assessment by a team of economists from both the U.S. government and the Government of El Salvador. The framework requires El Salvador to make commitments that will complement the U.S. assistance being offered in the areas that have been identified as obstacles to growth such as complementary citizen security programs being implemented in El Salvador under the Central America Regional Security Initiative (CARSI).

In the area of enhanced citizen security cooperation with the Government of El Salvador under CARSI, we have made significant headway on establishing an electronic monitoring center that will be an important tool in combating organized and transnational crime. For the past year, I have worked in close coordination with our law enforcement agencies to engage the Salvadoran government to move

this project forward and am pleased to note that the new facility is scheduled to open by the end of the year.

Another key Administration priority has been economic growth. As I mentioned previously, our mission is embracing the opportunity for transformation presented by the Partnership for Growth. My team and I have worked with the Government of El Salvador, many U.S. agencies represented in El Salvador and their counterparts in DC to formulate a joint action plan with a mix of programs and technical exchanges to foster economic growth. If confirmed, I will continue to be an advocate and architect for this important initiative and ensure its implementation.

As part of our efforts to encourage more inclusive and effective government to achieve broad strategic goals in El Salvador, I made it my priority to build bridges between the private sector and the government. The transition from 20 years of conservative rule to a new left-leaning administration in El Salvador has at times presented both opportunities and challenges for the private sector, which has traditionally identified with the former ruling party.

Building trust between the government and the private sector to work in partnership for the future of El Salvador is essential. The Ambassador's residence has been a place where both sides can feel comfortable on neutral ground to discuss issues of importance – yet where significant divergence of opinion and approach exists within Salvadoran society. We have been able to create a political space in the middle for different factions to come together. I believe that an important part of diplomacy is creating positive conditions which lead to increased understanding and cooperation, and I have tried to position the Mission as an honest intermediary.

Another focus has been developing and empowering the staff of the Embassy. There are over a dozen agencies represented within the Embassy, all with different bureaucratic cultures and specific missions, but each with the same overarching goal of advancing the interests of the United States. One of my goals in the last year has been to develop mission personnel into a more effective and cohesive team. I have invited every member of the mission to meet with me and with each other at the Ambassador's residence. Likewise, I have stressed the importance of investing in human capital by promoting training and a strong sense of community, both with our Direct Hire American staff and Locally Engaged personnel. These efforts have increased mission unity, fostered a positive and collegial work environment, and created a more effective team.

I believe this is a critical time for U.S. diplomacy. We have and will continue to reach out to the complete spectrum of Salvadoran society, not just government leaders, and the nation's elites, but to opinion leaders, community leaders, youth, children and all facets of civil society. We have hosted several joint military exercises with the Salvadoran military and sponsored events for local artists and women's groups. All this has been with the goal of strengthening bilateral ties.

Diplomacy is critical, and as we face increasing dangers throughout the world, I am humbled by the confidence the Administration has placed in me. During my tenure as Ambassador in El Salvador, I have represented the strategic interests of the United States to the utmost of my abilities. If confirmed, I will continue to do so as I strive to further strengthen the ties between the government and people of the United States and El Salvador

I thank you again for your time and hospitality and would be pleased to respond to any questions you have.