

Testimony of Robert T. Yamate
Ambassador-Designate to the Republic of Madagascar and the Union of the
Comoros
September 11, 2014

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Flake, and Members of the Committee, I am honored to appear before you today as President Obama's nominee as Ambassador to the Republic of Madagascar and the Union of the Comoros. If confirmed, I look forward to strengthening our relationships with the Government of Madagascar and the Government of the Comoros.

Mr. Chairman, please allow me at this time to introduce to you and the rest of the committee my wife, Michiko, who has been my partner and confidante through almost thirty years of Foreign Service assignments.

My career with the Department of State, particularly my postings in Africa, has given me the expertise and experience that will enable me to lead our relations with Madagascar and the Comoros effectively. I particularly enjoyed my assignments in the region, in Dakar, Abidjan, Harare, and, most significant in today's discussion, Antananarivo where I served over twenty years ago.

This is a critical time in our engagement with Madagascar. The 2009 coup resulted in sanctions and restrictions during the regime of the de-facto government.

After nearly five years of international isolation, President Rajaonarimampianina's (Ra-Jo-Nar-Mam-PYANN's) win in the 2013 democratic elections has given us the opportunity to engage with the new government in support of the country's democracy, development, security, and economic improvement.

The new Government of Madagascar outlined in the "General State Policy," its principal priorities: alleviating poverty and instability, strengthening rule of law, combatting corruption, increasing foreign direct investment, and developing the private sector. The U.S. goals in Madagascar align well with Madagascar's and also include promoting good governance and respect for human rights. President Rajaonarimampianina has taken steps in the right direction. The Ministry of Justice's recent assessment of anti-corruption efforts, carried out in conjunction with the United Nations Development Program is one such step. Early in his presidency, Rajaonarimampianina also dismantled two military units that were believed to have committed human rights abuses and illicit activity. If confirmed as Ambassador, I will work with my counterparts to increase the capacity of the Malagasy maritime forces and law enforcement entities.

Mr. Chairman, Madagascar has unique and abundant flora and fauna, 80% of which are endemic to this island nation. Madagascar is known for its rosewood,

as well as its diverse wildlife, including lemurs and tortoises. Due to illegal harvesting and export, this valuable natural heritage is under threat. With our assistance restrictions lifted, USAID has allocated \$2.5 million in FY 2014 funds to help protect the country's unique ecosystem, working towards the U.S. aim of conserving global biodiversity.

The U.S. Embassy in Antananarivo is committed to supporting the National Export Initiative in Madagascar, increasing exports from America. The best prospects for exports and investment lie in the extractive, construction, tourism, and textile sectors. In June of this year, the U.S. Government reestablished Madagascar's eligibility for the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), creating new opportunities for employment for thousands of Malagasy, and improving the business and investment climate.

Strengthening the economy is crucial in Madagascar, where the latest figures from 2012 show that 81% of the population lives on less than \$1.25 per day. Natural disasters -- including periodic cyclones, drought, and locust infestation -- have further compromised the living standard of the Malagasy people. USAID's development assistance programs continue to play a significant role in preserving

the health and welfare of millions of Malagasy. In FY 2014, we intend to provide \$63 million for food aid and health programs.

Mr. Chairman, if confirmed, I will also serve as Ambassador to the Union of the Comoros. Our aim is to expand positive relationships in these strategically located islands, which are home to moderate Sunni Muslim communities and a fledgling democratic state. From the time Comoros gained independence from France in 1975 until 2000, Comoros suffered 20 coups or attempted coups. Today, I am happy to note, Comoros is in its second decade of democratic rule, with peaceful transfers of power since 2001. President Dhoinine (dwah-hee-NEE-nee) came into power in 2011, and welcomes increased U.S. Government engagement with Comoros to improve the capacity of government operations, provide English language instruction, encourage U.S. direct investment, and enhance security cooperation. While we lack a full-time U.S. presence in the Comoros, we maintain a close relationship with our public affairs programming, mil-to-mil cooperation, and regular weekly visits by a full-time Comoros officer resident in Madagascar. If confirmed, I plan to visit the Comoros regularly. In addition, the Department of Defense supports an English-language military training facility and medical clinic.

Looking ahead, if confirmed, I look forward to the opportunity to serve as Ambassador to Madagascar and the Comoros, to advance and strengthen our relationships with both countries in a number of areas, notably development,

stability, and economic cooperation. Mr. Chairman, I thank you and the Committee for considering my nomination, and look forward to answering any questions you may have.