

**Opening Statement of Donna A. Welton
Nominee for U.S. Ambassador to Timor-Leste
Senate Committee on Foreign Relations
February 8, 2024**

Chairman Cardin, Ranking Member Risch, and distinguished Members of the committee, it is an honor to be here today as President Biden's nominee to serve as the U.S. Ambassador to Timor-Leste. I am deeply grateful to the President and Secretary Blinken for placing their confidence in me to represent the United States. If confirmed, I look forward to working closely with this Committee to advance U.S. interests in Timor-Leste.

I am here today because of the support of friends and family, especially my three children – Hannah, Ian, and Esther – who have always kept me grounded and made me laugh and always proud. I would also like to take this opportunity to thank my colleagues who began this journey with me in 1984 with the United States Information Agency, one of whom, Carlos Aranaga, is here today. We were charged with telling America's story to the world. We did, and still do. That mission has never been more important.

I grew up in a small town in upstate New York. I was the first person in my family to have a passport, getting on a plane when I was 16 to spend a year living in Japan as an exchange student. That experience gave me the courage and the language skills to pursue public service as a diplomat, and an appreciation for powerful change that can come through international education.

As a career Foreign Service Officer, I have dedicated over 30 years of my life to serving our country. It has been a privilege to do so.

The United States and Timor-Leste enjoy strong bilateral relations. Timor-Leste is a democracy that shares our commitment to human rights and fundamental freedoms. It is also a developing country with nascent institutions, limited human capital, and significant economic and health challenges. Through engagement that strengthens Timor-Leste's governance institutions, security, and economic stability, the United States has become one of Timor-Leste's most essential partners. If confirmed, I will focus on deepening our partnership as we work together towards a free and open Indo-Pacific region.

While direct trade between the United States and Timor-Leste is small, we are supporting Timor-Leste's efforts to diversify its economy and further integrate into global commerce. We support Timor-Leste's bids to join ASEAN and the WTO and are fostering its commercial law and regulatory regime. We are also providing development assistance that is focused on helping Timor-Leste build a diverse and inclusive economy. USAID, the Millennium Challenge Corporation, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and Peace Corps are all delivering programs that improve economic opportunity and diversification as well as the health and education of Timor-Leste's people. If confirmed, I will ensure U.S. development assistance continues to

advance U.S. national security and economic prosperity and promotes a path to Timorese self-reliance and resilience.

Our growing security cooperation with Timor-Leste is focused on humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, maritime and border security, and professionalizing Timorese defense forces. A rotating U.S. Navy Seabees detachment provides critical humanitarian assistance and infrastructure support to the Timorese people. Timor-Leste joined the National Guard State Partnership program with Rhode Island in 2020, and the United States trains Timorese law enforcement personnel at our International Law Enforcement Academy in Thailand. The United States is supporting the rehabilitation of Baucau Airfield and in June 2023 the United States provided the Government of Timor-Leste a Cessna aircraft, enabling Timor-Leste to better monitor its territory, respond to natural disasters, and promote economic development. If confirmed, I will work to build on these initiatives that benefit thousands of Timorese citizens, bolster the influence of the United States, and advance our vision for a free and open Indo-Pacific region.

With a young, growing population, and a youth unemployment rate of 33 percent, Timor-Leste's leaders are focused on accessing economic and educational opportunities. The United States has responded to that call over the last 21 years by providing more than 700 Timorese young leaders with opportunities to develop essential skills through U.S. education and exchange programs. This includes the Fulbright program, the U.S.-Timor-Leste scholarship program, the Young Southeast Asian Leaders Initiative, media development, and English language scholarships. These people-to-people connections promote mutual understanding between our nations and strengthen our bilateral relationship. In a country with limited exposure to the United States, engaging the next generation of Timorese leaders and changemakers is vital. If confirmed, I will work to build upon and expand these exchange programs that build bridges between our two peoples.

Finally, if confirmed, my highest priority will be the safety and security of all U.S. citizens in Timor-Leste. I will also prioritize the well-being of our Mission personnel and their families and ensure a productive, safe, and respectful workplace.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear here today, and I look forward to your questions.