STATEMENT OF THE HONORABLE HILLARY RODHAM CLINTON, SECRETARY OF STATE, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE

Secretary CLINTON. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. And I thank you and the ranking member and members of the committee, both of longstanding tenure and brand new members. And I appreciate your patience for me to be able to come to fulfill my commitment to you, actually to the former chairwoman, that I would be here to discuss the attack in Benghazi. I appreciate this opportunity. I will submit my full testimony for the record. I want to make just a few points.

First, the terrorist attacks in Benghazi that claimed the lives of four brave Americans, Chris Stevens, Sean Smith, Tyrone Woods, and Glen Doherty, are part of a broader strategic challenge to the United States and our partners in North Africa. I think it is important we understand the context for this challenge as we work together to protect our people and honor our fallen colleagues.

Any clear-eyed examination of this matter must begin with this sobering fact: Since 1988, there have been 19 Accountability Review Boards investigating attacks on American diplomats and their facilities. Since 1977, 65 American diplomatic personnel have been killed by terrorists. In addition to those who have been killed, we know what happened in Tehran with hostages being taken in 1979; our Embassy and Marine barracks bombed in Beirut in 1983; Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia 1996; our Embassies in East Africa in 1998; consulate staff murdered in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia in 2004; the Khost attack in Afghanistan in 2009; and too many others.

But I also want to stress the list of attacks that were foiled, crises averted, and lives saved is even longer. We should never forget that the security professionals get it right more than 99 percent of the time, against difficult odds, because the terrorists only need to get it right once. That is why, like all my predecessors, I trust the Diplomatic Security professionals with my life.

Let’s also remember that, as the chairman and the ranking member pointed out, administrations of both parties, in partnership with Congress, have made concerted and good-faith efforts to learn from the tragedies that have occurred to implement recommendations from the review boards, to seek the necessary resources to better protect our people in a constantly evolving threat environment.

In fact, Mr. Chairman, of the 19 Accountability Review Boards that have been held since 1988, only two have been made public. I want to stress that, because the two that have been made public, coming out of the East Africa Embassy bombings and this one, are attempts, honest attempts by the State Department, by the Secretary, Secretary Albright and myself, to be as transparent and open as possible. We wanted to be sure that whatever these independent, nonpartisan boards found would be made available to the Congress and to the American people, because as I have said many times since September 11, I take responsibility, and nobody is more committed to getting this right. I am determined to leave the State Department and our country safer, stronger, and more secure.

Now, taking responsibility meant not only moving quickly in those first uncertain hours and days to respond to the immediate crisis, but also to make sure we were protecting our people and posts in high-threat areas across the region and the world. It also meant launching an independent investigation to determine exactly what happened in Benghazi, and to recommend steps for improvement. And it also meant intensifying our efforts to combat terrorism and support emerging democracies in North Africa and beyond. Let me share briefly the lessons we have learned up until now.

First, let’s start on the night of September 11 itself and those difficult early days. I directed our response from the State Department and stayed in close contact with officials from across our Government and the Libyan Government. So I did see firsthand what Ambassador Pickering and Chairman Mullen called timely and exceptional coordination. No delays in decision-making. No denials of support from Washington or from our military. And I want to echo the review board’s praise for the valor and courage of our people on the ground, especially our security professionals in Benghazi and Tripoli. The board said our response saved American lives in real time, and it did.

The very next morning I told the American people, and I quote, ‘‘Heavily armed militants assaulted our compound,’’ and vowed to bring them to justice. And I stood later that day with President Obama as he spoke of an act of terror.

Now, you may recall, at the same time period, we were also seeing violent attacks on our Embassies in Cairo, Sana’a, Tunis, and Khartoum, as well as large protests outside many other posts, from India to Indonesia, where thousands of our diplomats serve.

So I immediately ordered a review of our security posture around the world, with particular scrutiny for high-threat posts. And I asked the Department of Defense to join Interagency Security Assessment Teams and to dispatch hundreds of additional Marine security guards. I named the first Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for High Threat Posts so that missions in dangerous places get the attention they need. And we reached out to Congress to help address physical vulnerabilities, including risks from fire and to hire additional Diplomatic Security personnel and Marine Security Guards.

Second, even as I took these steps, I quickly moved to appoint the Accountability Review Board because I wanted them to come forward with their report before I left, because I felt the responsibility, and I wanted to be sure that I was putting in motion the response to whatever they found. What was wrong? How do we fix it?

I have accepted every one of their recommendations. Our Deputy Secretary for Management and Resources, Deputy Tom Nides, who appeared before this committee last month, is leading a task force to ensure all 29 are implemented quickly and completely, as well as pursuing additional steps above and beyond the board.

I pledged in my letter to you last month that implementation has now begun on all 29 recommendations. We have translated them into 64 specific action items. They were all assigned to specific bureaus and offices, with clear timelines for completion. Fully 85 percent are on track to be completed by the end of March, with a number completed already. But we are also taking a top to bottom look to rethink how we make decisions on where, when, and whether our people should operate in high-threat areas and how we respond.

We are initiating an annual high-threat post review, chaired for the first time in American history, I suppose, by the Secretary of State, and ongoing reviews by the deputy secretaries to ensure that pivotal questions about security reach the highest level. And we will regularize protocols for sharing information with Congress.

Now, in addition to the immediate action we took, and the review board process, we are moving on a third front, addressing the broader strategic challenge in North Africa and the wider region.

Benghazi did not happen in a vacuum. The Arab revolutions have scrambled power dynamics and shattered security forces across the region. Instability in Mali has created an expanding safe haven for terrorists who look to extend their influence and plot further attacks of the kind we just saw last week in Algeria. And let me offer our deepest condolences to the families of the Americans and all the people from many nations killed and injured in the Algerian hostage crisis. We remain in close touch with the Government of Algeria, ready to provide assistance if needed, and also seeking to gain a fuller understanding of what took place so we can work together to prevent such terrorist attacks in the future.

Now, concerns about terrorism and instability in North Africa are not new, of course. Indeed, they have been a top priority for this entire national security team. But we need to work together to accelerate a diplomatic campaign to increase pressure on alQaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and other terrorist groups in the region. I have conferred with the President of Libya, the Foreign Ministers and Prime Ministers of Tunisia and Morocco. Two weeks later, after the attack, I met with a very large group of regional leaders at the U.N. and was part of a special meeting focused on Mali and the Sahel. In October, I flew to Algeria to discuss the fight against AQIM. In November, I sent Deputy Secretary Bill Burns on an interagency group to Algiers to continue that conversation. And then, in my stead, he co-chaired the Global Counterterrorism Forum that was held in Abu Dhabi and a meeting in Tunis, working not only on building new democracies but reforming security services.

These are just a few of the constant diplomatic engagements that we are having focused on targeting al-Qaeda’s syndicate of terror, closing safe havens, cutting off finances, countering their extremist ideology, slowing the flow of new recruits. We continue to hunt the terrorists responsible for the attacks in Benghazi, and are determined to bring them to justice. And we are using our diplomatic and economic tools to support the emerging democracies, including Libya, in order to give them the strength to provide a path away from extremism.

But finally, the United States must continue to lead in the Middle East, in North Africa, and around the globe. We have come a long way in the past 4 years, and we cannot afford to retreat now. When America is absent, especially from unstable environments, there are consequences: Extremism takes root; our interests suffer; and our security at home is threatened. That is why Chris Stevens went to Benghazi in the first place. I asked him to go. During the beginning of the revolution against Ghadafi, we needed somebody in Benghazi who could begin to build bridges with the insurgents and to begin to demonstrate that America would stand against Ghadafi. Nobody knew the dangers or the opportunities better than Chris, first, during the revolution, then during the transition: A weak Libyan Government, marauding militias, even terrorist groups, a bomb exploded in the parking lot of his hotel. He never wavered. He never asked to come home. He never said, let’s shut it down, quit, and go somewhere else, because he understood it was critical for America to be represented in that place at that pivotal time.

So, Mr. Chairman, we do have to work harder and better to balance the risks and the opportunities. Our men and women who serve overseas understand that we do accept a level of risk to represent and protect the country we love. They represent the best traditions of a bold and generous Nation. They cannot work in bunkers and do their jobs. But it is our responsibility to make sure they have the resources they need to do those jobs and to do everything we can to reduce the risks they face.

 For me, this is not just a matter of policy; it is personal, because I have had the great honor to lead the men and women of the State Department and USAID, nearly 70,000 serving here in Washington and at more than 275 posts around the world. They get up and go to work every day, often in difficult and dangerous circumstances, thousands of miles from home, because they believe the United States is the most extraordinary force for peace and progress the Earth has ever known.

And when we suffer tragedies overseas, the number of Americans applying to the Foreign Service actually increases. That tells us everything we need to know about the kind of patriots I am talking about. They do ask what they can do for their country. And America is stronger for it.

So today, after 4 years in this job, traveling nearly 1 million miles and visiting 112 countries, my faith in our country and our future is stronger than ever. Every time that blue and white airplane carrying the words ‘‘United States of America’’ touches down in some far off capital, I feel again the honor it is to represent the world’s indispensable Nation, and I am confident that with your help, we will continue to keep the United States safe, strong, and exceptional. And I would be very happy to answer your questions.

[The prepared statement of Secretary Clinton follows]