

US - Remaking USAID for a Permanent War on Terror? (Bill Berkowitz, IPS)

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27/01/2006 - [IPS](#) - *In a series of developments — some more publicised than others — the United States Agency for International Development, or USAID, has been undergoing a transformation that will more closely align its activities with the State Department and the Pentagon.*

These changes could threaten the agency's original emphasis of concentrating on long-term social and economic assistance projects, and steer it toward greater involvement in more immediate political and military concerns, such as Pres. George W. Bush's war on terror.

On Jan. 18, the Bush administration nominated Randall Tobias to serve both as the nation's first director of foreign assistance and as the head of USAID, the principal government agency that administers economic and humanitarian assistance worldwide.

The new position at the State Department will oversee all U.S. foreign aid programmes. (Tobias is slated to replace Andrew Natsios, the former head of USAID who recently resigned for a teaching post at Georgetown University.)

Tobias will also be charged with the "develop[ment of] a coordinated [federal] foreign assistance strategy, including ... five-year country-specific assistance strategies and annual country-specific assistance operational plans", according to a department statement.

Since 2003, Randall Tobias, a major donor to the Republican Party, has been serving as coordinator of the Office of Global AIDS. Some longtime AIDS activists have criticised his leadership as HIV/AIDS czar, claiming that he has emphasised abstinence-only HIV prevention programmes, and hasn't been an advocate of the use of generic drugs for HIV/AIDS treatment in developing countries.

Subject to Senate approval, Tobias will have a rank equivalent to deputy secretary of state, reporting directly to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, who, the Financial Times recently reported, "is driving what she calls 'transformational diplomacy' with the aim of changing the world".

While Tobias's appointment has drawn considerable fire from critics, another development related to the USAID's role in a changing world has gone virtually unnoticed by the media.

With much less fanfare and a minimal amount of press coverage, last Oct. 19, at a public hearing of the Advisory Committee on Voluntary Foreign Aid, USAID Assistant Administrator Michael Hess formally announced the formation of a new USAID office to coordinate humanitarian efforts, planning and doctrine with the U.S. Department of Defence and the State Department.

The advisory committee, set up after World War II to link the U.S. government and private volunteer organisations active in humanitarian assistance and development work overseas, consists of 24 private citizens with extensive international development experience.

The new USAID department, the Office of Military Affairs (OMA), is a Washington-based unit of the USAID Bureau of Democracy, Conflict and Humanitarian Assistance.

Hess acknowledged that OMA would be sending "development professionals" to the five geographic unified Combatant Commands — Central Command, Southern Command, Northern Command, Pacific

Command and European Command — to assist military professionals in assessing development needs and priorities.

SOCOM (The U.S. Special Operations Command) is located at MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa, Florida, and according to its mission statement, it "leads, plans, synchronises, and as directed, executes global operations against terrorist networks".

According to a report by Steve Peacock in the January/February 2006 issue of the NACLA Report on the Americas, late last year, OMA began searching for "a senior military advisor" that would take on the task of developing the agency. The senior advisor's "mission", NACLA reported, "is to transform USAID's relationship with the Pentagon and to execute policy that comports with U.S. national security objectives".

"Since post-conflict reconstruction is a pillar of the U.S. national security strategy," USAID's Michael Hess pointed out, it was essential that USAID develop "an operational link with the military on how to better coordinate strategic goals".

In addition to the staff positions at the various command centres, Hess said USAID also plans to work together with the military to "maintain emergency response readiness" for future disasters and other conflicts. OMA "would serve as a contact point to increase working relationships between non-governmental organisations and the U.S. military".

In testimony before the U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations in June of last year, James Kunder, USAID's assistant administrator for Asia and the Near East, laid out the rationale for creating OMA.

"An important element of our restructuring for stabilisation and reconstruction efforts is a more formal linkage with the U.S. Department of Defence at the operational level," Kunder told the Senate Committee. While USAID has worked "closely with military units in Afghanistan, Iraq, in the tsunami response, and in many other locales", it was necessary to "establish improved planning and liaison structures".

To accomplish this, Kunder added, USAID created a Military Policy Board, and a new Office of Military Affairs.

OMA, which still has not received coverage in the mainstream media, is also actively seeking to fill "several military advisory staff positions that will enhance its ability to carry out reconstruction and stabilisation initiatives jointly with, rather than independent of, the Department of Defence (DOD)".

Acknowledging the importance of education to the development process, Hess said that the Office of Military Affairs "will be able to integrate best training and education practices among the military's civil affairs officers and USAID workers to increase capacity".

A November 2004 report entitled "Improving Lives: Military Humanitarian and Assistance Programmes," published by eJournal USA — an electronic journal of the U.S. State Department — maintained that the U.S. military has been "carry[ing] out military training and humanitarian assistance programmes for countries around the world".

These programmes involve the Department of Defence, in cooperation with the Department of State and USAID, which "funds many of the assistance and training programmes, which are in keeping with President Bush's stated goal, as expressed in a recent radio address, 'to pursue a confident foreign policy agenda that will spread freedom and hope and make our nation more secure'."

USAID's Michael Hess also pointed out that his agency and the military have worked together successfully in a number of humanitarian situations, including in Indonesia following the December 2004 earthquake and tsunami. That experience indicated that it was imperative that "a strategic planning relationship between USAID and the military" be solidified.

Bill Berkowitz is a longtime observer of the conservative movement. His WorkingForChange column "Conservative Watch" documents the strategies, players, institutions, victories and defeats of the U.S. Right.

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