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## Obama administration's foreign aid job left open

By JULIE PACE (AP) – 4 days ago

WASHINGTON — President Barack Obama faces increasing pressure to fill his administration's vacant top foreign assistance post, but there's no candidate in sight nine months into his term.

The U.S. Agency for International Development is in charge of America's overseas aid, and Obama — as well as Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton — have said they want the agency to play a bigger role in U.S. foreign policy. Obama and Clinton have said USAID is crucial to deploying their preferred "smart power" foreign policy strategy, which envisions more equal roles for diplomacy and development alongside defense.

But leaving the top job at USAID open for so long has some worried about the fate of Obama's goals, from reshaping Afghanistan strategy to parceling out a foreign aid budget twice as large as the previous administration's budget.

And at a time the president has said he wants to restore America's reputation abroad, there's concern the leadership vacancy is weakening an agency best positioned to win goodwill for the U.S. by improving living conditions for people around the world.

White House officials have not explained the delay nor offered a timeline for a nominee.

Spokesman Tommy Vietor said Obama wants to appoint a qualified nominee as soon as possible. He noted that the vacancy has not prevented the administration from launching ambitious development projects, including what Vietor called a "landmark initiative" — a \$20 billion food security program with the backing of some of the world's largest economies.

But with potential candidates facing an arduous vetting process and a job description that's ill-defined, many in the development community believe the administration's problem may be finding someone who actually wants the job.

"By not having a USAID administrator in place, unfortunately, everyone is poorly served," said Samuel Worthington, president of InterAction, a coalition of humanitarian organizations.

The problem could be the most immediate in Afghanistan and Pakistan. As the president mulls an overhaul of the war, a major theme in the discussions with his national security team — and a point of agreement among most — is the need to significantly build U.S. civilian efforts alongside any military increase.

Not having a strong USAID leader at the table for those sessions is "undercutting your international development voice," said J. Brian Atwood, a former agency administrator in the 1990s.

Congress isn't happy, either.

Last month, Democratic Sen. John Kerry, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and Sen. Dick Lugar, the committee's top Republican, jointly wrote Obama to say that their efforts to support the president's development agenda on Capitol Hill are "hampered by a leadership vacuum" at USAID.

To speed things up, the lawmakers suggested Obama choose someone who already has gone through the administration's cumbersome vetting process.

That exhaustive series of personal and financial disclosures is taking the largest share of the blame for delaying a nomination, with several highly qualified candidates turning down the opportunity. The most notable was Paul Farmer, a physician and Harvard professor well-known for development work in Haiti and Rwanda.

Clinton had hoped to announce Farmer's nomination during a meeting with USAID employees in July. Instead, she was left lamenting — in unusually open and blunt terms — vetting procedures she called "ridiculous," "a nightmare," and "frustrating beyond words."

Filling the USAID administrator post doesn't typically cause president's headaches. Former Presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush nominated an administrator within their first two months in office.

Obama has chosen nominees for more than 60 percent of the high-level posts that require Senate approval, according to the Presidential Transition Project, a nonpartisan organization that tracks appointments. That puts him on pace with previous administrations.

In the absence of a USAID administrator, the strongest voice on development has been Clinton. Since taking the helm at State, she's made it clear that she sees diplomacy and development as crucial to U.S. missions overseas. She has pressed this point during the Afghanistan and Pakistan sessions.

Still, despite praise for that stance, there also is deep concern in the development community that USAID is weakening as the clock ticks.

The agency has already seen its staff cut and some functions folded into the State Department. Now there's speculation that State will keep control of the aid agency's budget, with the new administrator answering to a deputy secretary of state. Two reviews currently under way — one in the White House and another at State — are aimed at answering those and other questions.

**AP** Associated Press



President Barack Obama arrives on the South Lawn of the White House in Washington, Friday, Oct. 23, 2009, after traveling to Boston and Stamford, Conn. (AP Photo/Charles Dharapak)

### Map



