

## **Uncle Sam Wants You to Make a Gift To Rebuild Iraq**

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WASHINGTON - Americans, particularly at this time of year, open their wallets to all manner of good causes. But donating to Uncle Sam's foreign-aid efforts isn't very high on the list.

In September, officials at the U.S. Agency for International Development unveiled what they considered to be an inspired idea: augment the billions of taxpayer dollars already allocated for foreign aid by asking individual Americans - especially those with strong ties to other countries - to give money for development projects.

The first needy case was obvious: Iraq. The oil revenue that was supposed to finance postwar rebuilding hasn't been flowing. U.S. government funds have also been slow to reach their target. Security woes, corruption, policy shifts by the U.S. reconstruction authorities and the general difficulty of doing business in Iraq have meant that just \$13 billion of the \$30 billion that Congress allocated for rebuilding the country and training its security forces was spent through August, according to the Government Accountability Office, a congressional watchdog.

So, on Sept. 9, Andrew Natsios, USAID's director, unveiled the Iraq Partnership in a speech to a gathering of Iraqi-American business leaders in West Bloomfield, Mich. The program, he said, would allow Americans to "contribute directly to local development projects in Iraq" and "help put desks in classrooms; provide water pumps to farmers; and improve medical services throughout the country." USAID hired a Washington nonprofit organization, GlobalGiving, to handle logistics and launch a Web site offering would-be donors choices ranging from a \$1,000 project to improve leukemia treatment at an Iraqi medical center to a \$10,000 effort to furnish schools with new blackboards and desks.

As of this week, though, the Iraq Partnership had raised "just north" of \$1,500, according to a USAID official with direct knowledge of the program's take. Since September, fund-raising appeals for Hurricane Katrina victims led by former presidents Bush and Clinton raised more than \$115 million.

Officials at USAID and GlobalGiving say that it's too early to judge the program, citing a USAID-assisted effort called Conexión Colombia that since 2003 has funneled more than \$700,000 in donations from Colombians living abroad to aid groups there working in education and nutrition, according to the group's Web site. USAID officials also point out that they haven't yet done any marketing or rolled out public endorsements. "Remember, this has only been operational for 90 days," says Kevin Sheridan, a USAID spokesman. "What you're seeing is version 1.1." Mari Kuraishi, the co-founder of GlobalGiving, said that prospective donors might also be distracted by the many other causes vying for their money in recent months.

Still, the slow pace of the program's fund raising comes as a blow to USAID and its partner. USAID wants to develop similar programs targeting expatriates from Haiti and other regions who are now living in the U.S. GlobalGiving still has ambitious plans of its own. The five-year-old outfit run by two former World Bank executives wants to revolutionize the world of philanthropy by creating a catalog of aid projects and presenting specific options to donors. GlobalGiving has received approximately \$1.5 million in USAID matching funds.

The Iraq Partnership's challenges also illustrate how hard it is to do aid work in Iraq, inhospitable as it is to relief workers and organizations. Most foreign-aid organizations pulled out of the country after a suicide bombing at the Baghdad headquarters of the Red Cross in late 2003 killed dozens of people. The few charities that remain work hard to keep the locations of their projects and the identities of their employees secret.

This past summer, when USAID officials were searching for creative ways to expand the pool of money available for overseas development projects, they hit on the idea of tapping the generosity of the millions of expatriates and immigrants who each year send billions of dollars back to countries including Mexico, India and China. The officials cited statistics showing that such remittances accounted for 25% of the \$112.6 billion that flowed from the U.S. to the developing world in 2003, double the share made up by formal government aid.

Why not tap the Iraqi expatriate community? "The idea is that if you have one to three million Iraqis in the diaspora, there is a significant portion that has the ability to give money back to their country," Mr. Sheridan says. "Is there a way to accommodate that?"

The Web site of the Iraq Partnership is like a charitable version of Amazon.com. Visitors first choose a theme - Democracy and Governance, Education, Economic Development - and then select the specific project they want to add to their "Giving Cart." Clicking on the Democracy theme, for instance, brings up an open-ended project to improve wheelchair access at Iraqi government buildings.

It is very similar to the GlobalGiving Web site, but has some key differences. The nonprofit, which keeps 10% of each donation for administrative costs, currently has a list of about 2,000 projects in 60 countries. Most of the listings include extensive details about the work being done - including the names, biographies and email addresses of those leading specific projects. Because of security concerns, the Iraq Partnership Web site, on the other hand, provides no information at all about where in the country a project is taking place or which organizations are involved. Instead, each aid project includes only a vague description of its scope and goal, along with quotes from project leaders identified only as "Anonymous." The unnamed head of the wheelchair-access project, for instance, is quoted as saying that the effort means that "all Iraqis will have the ability to participate in the building of a free and democratic Iraq."

A senior USAID official closely involved with the program acknowledged that the scarcity of information about the Iraq projects could make donors less likely to give money. But, he says, the agency is planning to soon add details about which provinces the projects are in, and later next year hopes to add specific town or city names. Down the road, the agency would like to identify the organizations and specific aid workers as well. USAID also wants to launch an

Arabic-language version of the site, he says.

Convincing Iraqi-Americans, though, may be tough. Martin Manna, executive director of the Chaldean-American Chamber of Commerce in Michigan, the group of Iraqi-American businesspeople that organized the conference at which Mr. Natsios unveiled the Iraq Partnership, says many of his members initially reacted coolly because they were more interested in getting government contracts than in giving money to a charitable program. He says that many remain confused about precisely how it works.

Today, Mr. Manna says that his organization, made up of business leaders from the largest Chaldean community outside Iraq, is already looking past the Iraq Partnership. The body is hoping to fund the construction of a fruit-processing plant in northern Iraq that would create needed jobs there and also make a profit that could be reinvested into similar projects. It is in talks with USAID to receive some government funds for the idea, he says.

USAID officials are undeterred, saying they hope to replicate the effort in other countries. Ms. Kuraishi says her organization is working with USAID on sites for both Haiti and Ethiopia.