

STATEMENT BY NISHA DESAI BISWAL

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ASSISTANT ADMINISTRATOR FOR ASIA
UNITED STATES AGENCY FOR INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT
BEFORE THE SENATE FOREIGN RELATIONS COMMITTEE
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Mr. Chairman and Distinguished Members of the Committee:

It is an honor to appear before you today as President Obama's nominee to be the Assistant Administrator for Asia at the United States Agency for International Development.

I am humbled by the trust and confidence that President Obama and Administrator Shah have placed in me to oversee United States development policy and programs in Asia and am grateful to have the strong support of Secretary Clinton.

If confirmed, I will work tirelessly with the dedicated men and women of USAID to fulfill the Secretary and Administrator's shared goal of restoring its status as the world's premier development agency.

I am particularly honored to be appearing before you, Chairman Webb. Your knowledge of Asia and commitment to its development are unmatched and have been instrumental in focusing greater attention to the strategic importance of the Asia Pacific region to the United States.

I also want to recognize Senior Deputy Assistant Administrator Dr. Frank Young, who has been serving as head of the Bureau for Asia. Dr. Young is a 30 year veteran of the USAID Foreign Service who came out of retirement to help the Agency during this critical time of transition. His knowledge and dedication embrace and reflect the best qualities of the men and women who serve in the Agency.

Finally, I want to thank and recognize my family, friends, and professional colleagues whose strong support and encouragement have allowed me to follow my passion and pursue this opportunity. I would like to introduce my husband and soul mate, Subrat, and our two spirited daughters, Safya and Kaya, who inspire and challenge me every day. My parents, Kanu and Lata Desai, my in-laws Nilambar and Anu Biswal and my brother, Pinank Desai and his family are also here. As first generation immigrants, our parents journeyed far from rural India to pursue the American Dream and a better life for their children. We are grateful for their continued sacrifices on our behalf.

I have had the privilege of working with USAID for over 17 years in various capacities. I have been part of the agency's agile response to humanitarian disasters as a desk officer in the Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance and, as a senior policy advisor in the Office of Transition Initiatives, I helped to design innovative approaches to post-conflict interventions. As chief of staff in the Management Bureau, I worked with senior officers to address the difficult management and staffing challenges facing the Agency. I also had the privilege of working with then Administrator

Brian Atwood as he sought to manage and meet the expectations of the Agency's partners in the interagency and external community. I have had an opportunity to view the agency from the outside -- as a partner in the NGO community and as policy staff providing oversight in Congress. Most recently, I have served as the majority clerk for the House State Foreign Operations Appropriations Subcommittee under the leadership of Chairman David Obey and Chairwoman Nita Lowey.

I believe passionately in the mission of USAID, and in the vital role it plays in advancing our national security interests and foreign policy goals and providing hope for a better future for millions around the world.

Through the years, I have focused a great deal on USAID's policies and programs in Asia and traveled extensively throughout the region. Nowhere is the work of this agency more evident than in Asia.

As Secretary Clinton noted in a speech before the Asia Society last year, "much of Asia enjoys peace and prosperity today ... due in no small part to American efforts over the last half century to support political, economic, security, and educational alliances with Asian nations."

With three of the world's largest economies and some of the fastest economic growth rates, the region has tremendous strategic importance for the United States both as a trading partner and a collaborator in tackling global challenges.

President Obama underscored our continuing commitment to Asia in his remarks in Tokyo last November when he noted that "we have a stake in the future of this region, because what happens here has a direct effect on our lives at home."

USAID operates in 24 countries in Asia with a program budget of nearly \$1.2 billion, excluding Afghanistan and Pakistan. It is a vast, diverse, and dynamic region where countries range from maturing economies and vibrant democracies, to ones that are newly emerging from conflict, to others that are still mired in political or ethnic violence and that struggle to provide basic services and opportunities to their citizens.

Yet, despite its strong economic growth, the Asia region is also home to two-thirds of the world's poor. While literacy rates have improved in the region overall, a large gender gap remains, particularly in South Asia, where literacy and enrollment rates for girls remain low. **For this reason, USAID continues to focus on programs that expand access to primary and secondary education in countries like Bangladesh and Indonesia.**

Rapid industrialization associated with economic growth is straining the region's environmental systems so **USAID has targeted resources to help countries like Nepal, Indonesia, Cambodia and the Philippines protect biodiversity and promote sustainable growth.**

Despite significant progress in reducing childhood mortality, chronic malnutrition and food insecurity continue to plague much of the region. **USAID is partnering with Bangladesh, Nepal,**

Cambodia, and Tajikistan as part of the President's food security initiative to improve agricultural production and food security.

With 60 percent of the world's Muslim population residing in Asia, USAID is also developing new programs and strategies to advance opportunities and foster greater understanding and engagement with Muslim communities in Asia.

Weak governance in some parts of Asia contributes to instability that feeds extremism and impedes economic and social progress. Transparency and accountability is weak even among some democratically elected governments. And, although respect for political rights and civil liberties has improved in the region overall since 1990, many countries in Asia continue to restrict these rights. **USAID is working with governments and civil society across Asia to expand the rule of law, to build greater respect for individual rights, and to help governments to be more transparent and accountable to their citizens.**

I am convinced that most of the solutions to the challenges facing the Asia region will come from the individuals and institutions in Asia. In my travels across the region over the years, I have seen that development is most transformative and sustainable when assistance programs are embraced and owned by the local population and there is a true partnership between both the donor and recipient nation.

If confirmed, I will seek to encourage development interventions that emphasize country-ownership and partnership, that strengthen governance and that seek to harness the entrepreneurial spirit of the people of Asia.

In that regard, I am encouraged and excited by the Administrator's vision to transform the Agency. Dr. Shah has spoken of the need to focus USAID on scalable, accountable, and impactful development interventions that are evidence-based and increasingly country-owned. He has also outlined reforms to modernize and streamline systems so that bureaucratic hurdles will not continue to impede assistance delivery.

Dr. Shah has underscored that there is a small window of opportunity to effect change. Even with a small window, there is a unique convergence of factors to help him in this undertaking, starting with President Obama's commitment to development, joined by a Secretary of State who is a knowledgeable and passionate advocate for USAID, a military that is increasingly aware and supportive of the need for a robust development capacity, and a Congress that has been willing to provide the resources needed to transform the Agency.

Achieving greater scale, impact, and focus will require leveraging resources from other donors and multilateral institutions as well as partnering with businesses, foundations and other non-traditional actors.

In these difficult economic times, Americans must have confidence that their tax dollars are being used accountably and will have impact.

If confirmed, I pledge to work tirelessly to help Dr. Shah to reform and revitalize USAID to meet its 21st century challenges.

I will have the honor, if confirmed, of working with the skilled staff of USAID and collaborating with my colleagues at the Department of State. In keeping with the “whole of government” approach, I will draw from the expertise housed in other U.S. Government agencies and in our implementing partners to ensure our programs in Asia have maximum impact and advance our foreign policy and national security interests.

Having worked in the legislative branch for over eight years, I understand the important role of Congress and, if confirmed, I will seek your counsel, that of your fellow Members of Congress and your staffs.

If confirmed, I look forward to helping USAID live up to its tremendous promise and potential.

Thank you again for giving me the opportunity to appear before you today and I welcome any questions you might have.