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New World Bank Chief Says Aiding Africa Is His Top Goal

By [ELIZABETH BECKER](#)

WASHINGTON, May 31 - When he becomes president of the World Bank on Wednesday, Paul D. Wolfowitz says, Africa will be his top priority.

"Nothing would be more satisfying than to feel at the end of however long a term I serve here that we played a role in changing Africa from a continent of despair to a continent of hope," he said Tuesday at his first news conference.

To underline that commitment, he will travel to Africa in June.

Mr. Wolfowitz becomes the 10th president of the bank, the world's largest development organization, at a time when experts are again asking basic questions about what works in pulling countries out of poverty.

One of the few things most development institutions agree on is the need for a large increase in development aid. The United Nations and the World Bank under James D. Wolfensohn, the departing president, have called for the world's rich nations to double the aid given to the poor.

After meeting with most of the bank's own experts over the last two weeks and reading dozens of books on the debate, Mr. Wolfowitz said he was relieved to be taking over the institution at a time when people are willing to experiment and exhibit "a certain open-mindedness.

"There's been a healthy change in the development approach," he said. "It's no longer one size fits all."

Surveying the array of issues tied up in the goal of reducing poverty, Mr. Wolfowitz said he would emphasize finding solutions in partnership with the countries involved; ensuring that women have the same opportunities as men; restoring the bank's role of building structures like roads, ports and bridges in poor countries; and coordinating the bank's efforts with other donors and institutions.

"The best approach is to put the people in developing countries in the driver's seat," he said, adding that

this often requires humility and patience.

He also singled out corruption as a major problem in development.

"Corruption is the biggest threat to democracy since communism," he said.

Mr. Wolfowitz comes directly to the World Bank from the United States Defense Department, where he was the deputy secretary and involved with the Iraq war, with its divisiveness. He said he hoped to leave the Pentagon behind him in his new job.

His arrival, however, has been greeted with a letter of protest signed by 303 groups from 62 countries. And he said he has had to convince skeptics within and outside the institution that he will not use the World Bank to pursue the foreign policy agenda of President Bush.

"I'll do that by being objective and credible," he said.

Mr. Wolfowitz said, however, that it has been far more common for foreign officials to ask him if he could help them out with his special access to the White House or Congress.

Mr. Bush nominated Mr. Wolfowitz for the position in March and he won unanimous approval from the World Bank's board. The United States has named all of the bank's presidents since its founding as part of the United Nations system, a practice that is coming under increasing criticism.

Africa will dominate Mr. Wolfensohn's work over the next months. After returning from his trip, he will attend the annual meeting of the Group of 8 industrial nations in Scotland in July. Prime Minister Tony Blair of Britain, the host, has placed Africa at the center of that agenda, and Mr. Wolfowitz has closely studied the report that Mr. Blair's commission on Africa prepared for the session.

The report's recommendations include abolishing many of the agricultural subsidies of rich nations, increasing aid to Africa by \$25 billion and strengthening protection of the environment, policies that are at odds with the administration and many in Congress.

His reading list also includes: "Why Globalization Works," by Martin Wolf; "The World's Banker," by Sebastian Mallaby; "Development as Freedom," by Amartya Sen; and "Voice for the World's Poor," a collection Mr. Wolfensohn's speeches.

Added to that pile of reading material was a thick study released on Tuesday by the Center for Global Development, a nonpartisan institute, listing the five tasks it says Mr. Wolfowitz needs to accomplish.

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