

Questions loom over foundation led by Anwar

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KUALA LUMPUR: Many unanswered questions remain about the Foundation for the Future to which Shaha Riza, World Bank president Paul Wolfowitz's girlfriend, was transferred to at the end of last year.

In October, its chairman, former deputy prime minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, wrote to Wolfowitz's counsellor Robin Cleveland asking for Riza to be moved from the State Department to the foundation, completing an arrangement which subsequently led to the bank president's resignation.

Riza had been seconded to the State Department from the World Bank where she was a communications officer in September 2005 to assist the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs on Middle East democracy issues.

While there, she helped set up what would become the foundation, which was announced by US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and ministers from the Middle East and Europe at the Forum for the Future in Bahrain in December 2005.

The United States pledged US\$35 million (RM119 million), and funding commitments were obtained from Bahrain, Jordan, Turkey, Qatar, the European Commission and eight European countries.

But one and a half years later, the foundation has done little, with its website saying it is still "in the process of establishing offices in Beirut".

According to the *Washington Post* last month, Riza was the only person working in the foundation's office in Washington.

The website lists no address or phone numbers and says the foundation is now "currently hiring" a chief financial officer and chief operating officer.

So far, only two projects have been approved but not yet implemented — a civil society resource centre and a seminar on the rule of law.

It was only in February that proposals were invited for grants "to promote the development of effective mechanisms for citizen participation" in the "priority areas" of "rule of law, independent media, empowerment of women, civic education and engagement of youth".

"It's a very new entity," said Anwar's special assistant, Nik Nazmi Nik Ahmad.

"Grants will most probably be given next month once the proper

mechanism of the foundation is in place."

Anwar "was brought in to the foundation as one of many leaders, including (former US Supreme Court Justice) Sandra Day O'Connor," said Assistant Professor Bridget Welsh of the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies in Washington.

The choice was part of the US administration's "broader effort to engage with the Muslim world", said Welsh, who knows Anwar through the school, where he has been a visiting scholar.

But, she added, "Anwar's desire to engage broadly on issues of democratisation and the concerns of the Muslim world brought him into something that has taken on a life of its own and was not the intent of the organisation."

Based on his writings on democracy and inter-faith dialogue, and his speeches on Islam and democracy, "Anwar was widely perceived by policy-makers in Washington to be highly suitable to head this movement for promoting democracy in the Middle East and the Muslim World", said a professor at another university in the US capital.

"Anwar's appointment as chairman of the Foundation for the Future appears to have been arranged by Wolfowitz, who also put Shaha Riza there," she said.

"Although Anwar is beholden to Wolfowitz, it is not expected that he will step down."

Anwar himself has declined comment pending an official statement from the foundation.

Contacted in Washington, David Foley, the deputy director for public affairs for the State Department's Near Eastern Affairs, refused to answer queries apart from confirming Riza's transfer.

According to the *Financial Times* this week, the department has opened an inquiry into its role in helping Wolfowitz resolve conflicts of interest that arose when he became president of the bank.

An official said that an earlier Pentagon investigation of an order by Wolfowitz, then the US deputy secretary of defence, for Riza to be included in a military contract to go to Iraq, was being reviewed.

A former World Bank official told the *New Straits Times*: "This is only just beginning."