

American

NEWS & VIEWS

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President Obama Reschedules Asia-Pacific Trip to June

By Merle David Kellerhals Jr.
Staff Writer

Washington — President Obama is postponing his weeklong trip to Guam, Indonesia and Australia until June so he can be in Washington when the U.S. Congress gives final consideration to domestic health care legislation, the White House announced March 18.

The president had planned to travel March 21–26, but decided he needed to be in Washington when Congress takes a final vote on one of the centerpieces of his domestic agenda, White House press secretary Robert Gibbs told reporters. Obama telephoned Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono and Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd to explain his plans.

“The president greatly regrets the delay. Our international alliances are critical to America’s security and economic progress, but passage of health insurance reform is of paramount importance, and the president is determined to see this battle through,” Gibbs told reporters.

Obama’s trip to Indonesia and Australia was seen as an important opportunity to advance America’s security and economic interests in the Asia-Pacific region, and to enhance essential partnerships, White House officials said.

“The Asia-Pacific is fundamental to our ability to achieve some of our top priorities, whether it’s doubling exports and achieving balanced and sustainable growth or fighting terrorism and combating climate change,” presidential adviser Ben Rhodes said at a recent press briefing on the trip. “In that effort, Indonesia and Australia are both essential partners to the United States.”

Obama was scheduled to leave for Guam March 21 and return to Washington March 26. The trip was previously delayed by three days to allow the president more time in the United States to advance his health care reform legislation that is pending final action in Congress.

Indonesia, where Obama lived for four years in his youth with his mother, was the centerpiece of this trip. He planned to sign a new, strategic Comprehensive Partnership Agreement that had been proposed by Indonesian President Yudhoyono in November 2008. The agreement covers a range of issues including economic ties, investment and trade, food security, science and technology, educational exchanges, social issues, politics and military cooperation in a critically important geographic region.

For the United States, Indonesia has also been a critical partner on security issues such as fighting terrorism, as well as Obama’s broader efforts to advance relations with the Muslim world.

Australia and Indonesia are members of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum, whose members are responsible for 55 percent of the global gross domestic product and 50 percent of global trade, says Jeff Bader, the senior director for Asian affairs at the National Security Council. And both nations are important powers that have become vital in regional and strategic security policymaking, he said.

U.S.-Russian Arms Reduction Deal Expected “Soon”

By Stephen Kaufman
Staff Writer

Washington — U.S. and Russian negotiators in Geneva are reporting “substantial progress” on a new Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) that would reduce the number of nuclear warheads deployed in both countries by about one-quarter, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton says, predicting a final agreement will be reached “soon.”

Speaking with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov in Moscow March 18, Clinton said pending a final agreement, the United States and Russia are beginning discussions on where and when it will be signed by President Obama and Russian President Dmitry Medvedev.

“We don’t want to get ahead of ourselves,” the secretary said. “First, our negotiators have to sign on the dotted line, so to speak, that they have completed the negotiations. And we’re looking forward to getting that word soon, and then we will move on to setting a time and a place for this very important event.”

Lavrov told reporters, “We have every reason to believe we are now at the finish line.”

The START pact would replace a previous version that expired at the end of 2009. White House press secretary Robert Gibbs said March 18 that the Obama administration wants to see a deal “that moves forward the president’s goal of nuclear security and reducing the amount of nuclear weapons in our world,” while also advancing U.S. national security interests.

“I think it is safe to say that the president has been more personally involved with these negotiations than you’ve probably seen in 20 or 25 years,” Gibbs said. The president has spent “an awful lot of his own time working directly with Mr. Medvedev to ensure that we make the

progress that we need.”

Clinton and Lavrov also discussed the nuclear security summit that will be held in Washington April 12–13.

“It especially is important for the United States and Russia, who bear the responsibility, to continue the way forward on nonproliferation and to work as partners in the global effort to secure fissile materials and counter the threat of nuclear terrorism,” Clinton said, citing the summit as a further example of U.S.-Russian cooperation.

However, the secretary described Russian plans to start the reactor it is building for Iran’s nuclear power plant later in 2010 as “premature,” and urged Russia and others in the international community instead to send “an unequivocal message” to Iran expressing collective concern over its nuclear activities.

While Iran has the right to peaceful and civil nuclear power, “Iran is not living up to its international obligations,” she said, and needs to hear a clear message that “its pursuit of nuclear weapons poses a direct threat both to regional and global security.”

The State Department’s acting deputy spokesman, Gordon Duguid, said March 18 that any civil nuclear facility in Iran must be under the auspices of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). “That is no different from any other nuclear power plant in countries that subscribe to the internationally accepted international regime,” he said.

However, Iran is in violation of its IAEA agreement, he continued. “We do not think that moving forward on a business-as-usual basis with Iran is something that we should be doing,” Duguid said, and the United States plans further discussions with Russia on the Bushehr reactor.

CIA Director: U.S. Attacks Have Weakened al-Qaida

By VOA News

CIA Director Leon Panetta says aggressive attacks against al-Qaida in Pakistan have forced Osama bin Laden and his top associates deeper into hiding, and weakened the terrorist group’s ability to plan sophisticated operations.

Panetta told the Washington Post newspaper that in a recently intercepted message an al-Qaida lieutenant urged bin Laden to come to the group’s rescue and provide leadership.

Panetta also said cooperation between the CIA and its Pakistani counterparts has improved over the past year. Meanwhile, another U.S. counterterrorism official said

March 17 that evidence suggests a drone attack last week in northern Pakistan killed a top al-Qaida leader.

The official, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said Hussein al-Yemeni may have helped plan the December 30 suicide bombing of a CIA post in Afghanistan.

That attack killed seven American intelligence officers and one Jordanian intelligence officer. U.S. counterterrorism analysts said the attack’s extensive preparation indicates that al-Qaida and its allies, despite being under pressure from drone strikes, still have the capacity for complex operations.

The CIA does not officially acknowledge the U.S. role in strikes in Pakistan, but Panetta said attacks on al-Qaida are, in his words, “the most aggressive operation” in the CIA’s history.

Climate Change Impact on Water Already Affects Nations Worldwide

United States helps U.N. effort to assess status of water in poor countries

By Cheryl Pellerin
Science Writer

Washington — Experts often characterize climate change in terms of a projected rise in global average temperature over the 21st century. People worldwide are feeling that heat now through their water supplies, as a warming planet begins to alter the land-sea-atmosphere cycle of water that makes life on Earth possible.

The water cycle has a critical role in the chemical, physical and biological processes that sustain ecosystems and influence Earth’s climate. Clouds, water vapor and precipitation affect heating and cooling of the Earth’s surface and atmosphere, and these affect global circulation and precipitation patterns.

Over the past 50 years, according to the U.S. Global Change Research Program, global average temperature and sea level have risen and precipitation patterns have increased in some parts of the world and decreased in others.

Changes in the water cycle can be linked to warming that has been observed over several decades, including rising water vapor in the atmosphere (enhancing the greenhouse effect); reduced snow cover and widespread ice melting; and changes in soil moisture and runoff. And global temperatures are expected to keep rising.

“Think about this: the year 2025. Nearly two-thirds of the world’s population — which continues to grow too fast — will be living in conditions that are termed water

stressed," Maria Otero, the State Department's under secretary for democracy and global affairs, said March 8. "The lack of a sustainable and timely supply of water will undermine food security, and that will become a source of tension, potentially leading to conflict. Climate change will only add to this."

Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton and Otero will speak on worldwide diplomatic and development efforts on water policy at a World Water Day event in Washington on March 22.

WORLD WATER DAY

The State Department and the U.S. Agency for International Development are partnering with the United Nations and other international organizations on World Water Day, March 22, to raise the profile of water quality around the world.

"Clean Water for a Healthy World" is the theme of this year's World Water Day, an annual event managed by UN-Water, a 27-member group of U.N. agencies, including the Food and Agriculture Organization, the World Meteorological Organization and the World Health Organization, whose missions are related to water.

"There will be increasing competition in many parts of the world for scarce water resources – even North America is not immune to it," said UN-Water Chairman Zafar Adeel, director of the Canada-based U.N. University's Institute for Water, Environment and Health. "We're also going to see greater impacts on the quality of water. It's not just how much water is there, but the quality of water for various uses – agriculture, drinking, industrial use – that's going to become much tougher."

For this reason, the United States emphasizes integrating water policy into the Obama administration's food security, global health and climate change initiatives. All these problems are linked, and they are all linked to water.

According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, higher water temperatures and changes in extreme weather, including floods and droughts, are projected to affect water quality and worsen many forms of water pollution from sediments, nutrients, pathogens, pesticides and salt, with possible negative effects on ecosystems, human health and water systems.

Even so, Adeel said, "water can be a very good integrator. You can actually bring together factions or competitors and sit down and talk about water in a professional sense. It's a very good medium around which collaboration can take place."

COUNTRY BRIEFS ON WATER

Such discussions are also important when UN-Water agencies work with developing-country leadership in nations that do not necessarily prioritize access to drinking water and sanitation as part of their national development plans.

In February, water experts from the UN-Water agencies met in Canada to plan a coordinated response to what the United Nations calls "a looming water crisis."

One outcome of the meeting, Adeel said, was the formation of a task force that will develop briefs on all aspects of water in an individual country. The United States is helping support the project. Work has begun on the briefs and they could be completed within two years.

"If we do it right," said Aaron Salzberg, special coordinator for water resources at the U.S. State Department, "each brief will be a one-page piece of paper that we can use in a variety of ways." It will provide tailored information to ministers of environment, health, food, energy and other ministries that deal with water issues, he said.

"A minister would walk into the room, and on his or her desk is a one-page summary that says here's your country today and here's your water situation," Salzberg said. "Here's what it's going to be 30 years from now. And here's what it's costing you now and what it will cost then in terms of human lives, economic growth and development and food productivity – in terms of things that really matter to decisionmakers. If we can do that, I think it will allow us to engage decisionmakers in a much more meaningful way."

In April, UN-Water will publish its 2010 Global Annual Assessment of Sanitation and Drinking Water report, which Salzberg calls "a step in the direction" of country water briefs.

"We need to build that data," Salzberg said. "The water community unfortunately hasn't done a very good job yet on a country-by-country basis assembling the data that allows decisionmakers to understand the impacts of water and sanitation on their countries."

United States Committed to Worldwide Cultural Preservation

Cultural heritage honored through U.S. grant support
By Yvette Ridenour
Special Correspondent

Washington – On virtually every continent, treasures from ancient civilizations are being conserved and restored through a U.S. program dedicated to the

preservation of cultural heritage in countries around the globe.

Since 2001, the U.S. Ambassadors Fund for Cultural Preservation (AFCP) has provided grant support to cultural heritage projects in more than 100 countries. To date, the Ambassadors Fund – administered by the U.S. State Department’s Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs – has supported more than 550 projects, totaling more than \$20 million, sending a strong message about the importance the United States places on the conservation of the culture of nations from every world region. In 2009, the fund supported projects in more than 90 countries.

“We look for well-crafted proposals for projects that meet the AFCP funding mandate and project criteria, and also make the case for cultural significance, urgency, sustainability, among other things,” said Martin Perschler, AFCP program coordinator. Funded projects have included technical support for the restoration of historic buildings, assessment and conservation of museum collections, archaeological site preservation, documentation to save traditional crafts, improved storage conditions for archives and manuscripts, and documentation of indigenous languages, music and dance.

A recent project supported by the Ambassadors Fund was the preservation of a mosque in Gao, Mali. The project helped support preservation of the remaining fragments of a mosque built in 1324 by Emperor Kankou Moussa, following his pilgrimage to Mecca. Designed by an Andalusian architect, the mosque bears witness to the exchange between the Sudan and the Mediterranean regions. The project included the construction of a protective shelter, the installation of interpretive site information and publication of a brochure on the history of the site.

“One of the most important impacts of this project was to raise local awareness and pride in Malian cultural heritage,” said Stephanie Syptak, a U.S. public affairs officer in Mali.

The Ambassadors Fund also supported preservation of traditional courtyards in northern Togo in 2006. “This project supported the preservation and documentation of ancient floor pavements in the north of Togo,” said Perschler. “Courtyards of housing compounds were traditionally paved with pottery shards, creating a mosaic. Samples dating to the 14th century were once found in Nigeria, Benin and Togo. Sites in Togo are the only remaining examples of this tradition, and only a few elderly women hold knowledge of this craft.”

One fascinating project from 2007 was the collection and

cataloguing of 30 traditional Cambodian folk tales, as part of the Prasat Han Chey Conservation and Restoration Project, in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. The last effort to collect Khmer folk tales took place more than 50 years ago. Most of the current storytellers are more than 90 years old, making the preservation of these fables extremely urgent. Thanks to help from the Ambassadors Fund, the stories will reach a wider audience because they will be published in both English and Khmer.

Two mosques dating from the mid-17th to early 18th centuries on the island of Pemba in Tanzania were restored through a grant from the Ambassadors Fund in 2006. The mosques contain unique features combining Swahili and Persian architecture, and had fallen into disrepair from the harsh climate and lack of maintenance.

An important archaeological project supported by the Ambassadors Fund was the preservation and exhibition of artifacts from the Hepu Temple (circa 200 B.C.-A.D. 200) in China. So far, the Ambassadors Fund has helped support nine projects in China. The Hepu Tombs, from the Han Dynasty, are in Guangxi province. Not only were the artifacts preserved, but the fund helped provide assistance with site protection to prevent looting. Hepu became an urban center in 111 B.C. This ancient port city was a key link on the so-called Silk Road of the Sea, which enabled maritime trade to flourish along the coastal areas of South China, reaching to Vietnam and beyond.

In 2005, the Ambassadors Fund helped restore and preserve precious historic architecture in Turkmenistan. The Ak-Sray-Ding Tower is located in the northern Turkmenistan town of Kunya Urgench and has become an important Sunni Muslim pilgrimage site. Located near the tower is a saints’ cemetery, where Turkmen say that God receives their prayers.

According to Turkmen legend, the tower represents the gift of a rich man to his daughter, who died as a young woman. Legend says that the daughter appeared to her father in a dream, asking him to build her a kejebe, or saddle with a canopy, which is traditionally placed atop a bride’s camel during Turkmen wedding processions. Her father built the tower, which resembles a kejebe, over her grave.

During the 1950s, however, the Khorezm Expedition inspected the site and determined that it could be the top of a watchtower for a long-buried city. The tower is located in Dashoguz, the northernmost region of Turkmenistan. Although Russian architects included the tower in a listing of unique historical building sites in 1947, archaeologists never researched the site properly until the Ambassadors Fund offered help. The tower probably dates from A.D. 11-12.

The Ambassadors Fund was established by Congress in 2001 to assist countries in preserving their cultural heritage. U.S. ambassadors from eligible countries submit proposals for an annual competition. Organizations interested in the program may contact the public affairs section of the U.S. Embassy in eligible countries. "Proposals are submitted in the fall, and the awards are granted in the spring," said Perschler.

The AFCP also has helped to reinforce each participating nation's cultural identity and strengthen community solidarity. Through a wide range of cultural preservation projects, the Ambassadors Fund promotes cooperation with other countries, reducing the threat of pillage of irreplaceable cultural artifacts and developing educational initiatives as well as long-term strategies for preserving cultural property.

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