

Obama starts Asia tour

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President Barack Obama has arrived in Bangkok, beginning a three-nation Asian tour. His visit fits a realignment of US priorities toward the Asia-Pacific region as conflict rages between Israel and Gaza militants.

US President Barack Obama touched down in Thailand on Sunday on the first leg of his trip to three Asian nations billed by Washington as a timely shift in US foreign policy toward the Asia-Pacific region and a resurgent China.

As the Israel-Gaza conflict continued to spike tensions in the Middle East, Obama was first due to visit a Buddhist temple, meet Thailand's King Bhumibol Adulyadej and also engage in talks with Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra.

As Obama flew into the Thai capital aboard Air Force One, a US deputy national security advisor Ben Rhodes said: "Allies are the cornerstone of our rebalancing effort in Asia. Thailand is actually the oldest treaty ally of the United States, an ally since 1954 and a key partner in Southeast Asia."

Shortly before Obama's arrival, suspected separatists detonated a bomb in southern Thailand, derailing a train and killing at least one person.

Asia-Pacific emphasis

Visiting Singapore on Saturday, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton had reaffirmed the US foreign policy realignment.

"Why is the American president spending all this time in Asia so soon after winning reelection?" Clinton asked. "Because so much of the history of the 21st century is being written here," said Clinton in an address at Singapore's Management University.

Clinton said the US was making progress in talks with countries on both sides of the Pacific towards finalizing a Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade pact, which would lower barriers and raise regulatory standards in a region accounting for 40 percent of world trade.

After a decade attending to "a war in Iraq that is now over and a war in Afghanistan that is winding down," Clinton said.

The new emphasis, she said, was on "jobs diplomacy" and "rebalancing" the global economy "so Americans export more, Asians import more and we avoid financial crises and build middle classes."

Historic visit to Myanmar due

Obama is due to make US presidential history on Monday by becoming the country's first president to visit Myanmar (otherwise known as Burma).

His scheduled visit to the once pariah state has prompted fierce criticism from some rights groups; they claim that the intended visit is premature considering the government's incomplete democratic reforms. Obama will meet with President Thein Sein and opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi.

Obama is then scheduled to visit Cambodia for an Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) meeting in the capital, Phnom Penh, where the South China Sea dispute and a controversial human rights declaration are expected to take center stage.



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