

**Obama drops Indonesia, Australia trip over health care**  
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US President Barack Obama dramatically postponed his trip to Indonesia and Australia until June, so he can battle for a historic health reform bill that could shape his legacy.

The decision, which will slow Obama's effort to intensify US engagement with the dynamic Asia Pacific region, was forced by the need to woo wavering Democratic lawmakers with a knife-edge vote on the plan expected on Sunday.

"We greatly regret the delay of the trip," White House spokesman Robert Gibbs said, adding that "health insurance reform is of paramount importance and the president is determined to see this battle through.

"The president believes that right now the place for him to be is in Washington."

Obama, who bills himself as America's first Pacific president, called both Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono and Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd to explain his dilemma.

Rudd shrugged off Obama's no-show, and suggested it would allow the president to spend more time in Australia, when he eventually arrives.

"I'm going to be very happy any time the president chooses to visit," Rudd told the Seven Network TV station.

"I know President Obama pretty well. It would be nice to have him and Michelle and the kids.

"He'd like to have a more relaxed visit than the 24-hour whip in, whip out that the last one had come down to."

Under pressure from some Democrats

Obama took the decision, under pressure from some Democrats, once it became clear that a crucial House of Representatives vote on health reform would not take place before Sunday afternoon.

"We did not want, at 10:00 on Sunday morning to make a call to the Indonesians and the Australians and say, 'I know we were going to be there in a matter of hours, but we're not going to be there,'" Gibbs said.

The postponement showed how domestic politics can sometimes constrain a US president's global engagement -- especially during his first term when his political plate is piled high.

Obama had been due at a state dinner in Indonesia, to hold talks with Yudhoyono and travel to Bali, before heading to Canberra for talks with Rudd and to address the Australian parliament.

He planned to stress Indonesia's emerging economic weight and the role of the world's most populous Muslim nation in battling extremism, as well as to build on his speech to the Muslim world in Cairo last year.

In Australia, Obama's aides had said he would focus on strong US-Australia trade links and would mark the 70th anniversary of their mutual alliance.

He had previously dropped a visit to Sydney, after originally delaying his planned departure from Thursday to Sunday.

Gibbs dismissed the notion that Obama would offend Indonesia, where the president lived for four years as a boy.

"Each of these two countries understands what the president has been working on, what he's been involved in and the importance that he has in seeing it through."

No permanent diplomatic damage

Ernest Bower, a Southeast Asia expert at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, predicted no permanent diplomatic damage.

"For most US presidents and most bilateral relationships, two consecutive postponements would put real strains on bilateral relations," he said.

"In this case, I believe President Obama will be given a very easy pass on this second (delay)."

But Bower added: "the stakes are now very high for following through with the trip in June."

He argued the postponement might have a positive impact because it could allow the second US presidential summit with leaders of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to be held in Hanoi.

But Walter Lohman, who heads the Asian Studies Center at the conservative Heritage Foundation think-tank, said Obama had undermined his own Asia policy.

"The new era of American engagement in Southeast Asia now seems so far away," Lohman said.

"Already burdened by a lack of a trade policy -- the substantive heart of Southeast Asia -- now leaders there cannot even count on the physical presence of the American president."

Obama had also been due to visit the US Pacific territory of Guam on the trip, partly to see US troops stationed there.

The president had been forced to ditch original plans to take his wife Michelle and daughters Malia and Sasha along on the trip.

Gibbs could not say whether the family would now go along in June.

-AFP