



US President Barack Obama is seen off by Japanese Foreign Minister Katsuya Okada (2nd L) as the US leader prepares to step onto Air Force One to depart from Tokyo's Haneda airport yesterday.

Obama seeks equal partnership in Asia

AP, Tokyo

US President Barack Obama pressed on with his mission to repair America's global standing, telling Asians he was determined to engage them as equal partners in the economy, diplomacy and security.

In a 40-minute speech Saturday that ranged across the multitude of issues, the president declared the United States a "nation of the Pacific. Asia and the United States are not separated by this great ocean; we are bound by it."

While he offered few specifics on the key issues of trade, Obama reached out warmly to China, soon expected to overtake Japan as the world's No. 2 economy

applauding Beijing's robust strides as a burgeoning economic engine.

"We welcome China's efforts to play a greater role on the world stage, a role in which their growing economy is joined by growing responsibility," Obama said in the speech to 1,500 prominent Japanese in a soaring downtown Tokyo concert hall.

It was the fifth major foreign address of Obama's 10-month presidency, continuing the sharp break with the unilateral approach that marked international relations under the Bush administration.

Obama reached out through several personal notes that delighted his audience, including calling himself "America's first Pacific president," referring to his time in Indonesia, birth in Hawaii and travels in Asia as a boy.

Moving into the substance of his eight-day journey through Asia, Obama was quick to spurn North Korea's nuclear belligerence, warning Pyongyang that the US and its Asian partners would "not be cowed" by the isolated dictatorship's nuclear tests and missile launches.

Obama said, however, the door was open for North Korea to come in from the cold and its deep isolation, an end to punishing UN sanctions if it stopped building nuclear weapons and scrapped those already believed to be in its arsenal.

Obama calls on Myanmar to free Suu Kyi

AFP, Tokyo

US President Barack Obama yesterday urged Myanmar to release detained democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi and other political prisoners, urging the regime to take a path to "true security and prosperity."

"We are now communicating directly with the leadership to make it clear that existing sanctions will remain until there are concrete steps toward democratic reform," he said of the military-ruled country also called Burma.

"We support a Burma that is unified, peaceful, prosperous and democratic. And as Burma moves in that direction, a better relationship with the United States is possible," Obama said in a speech delivered in Tokyo.

Legal minefield awaits 9/11 trial in New York

AFP, Washington

Trying the five men accused of the September 11 attacks poses a unique challenge to US prosecutors forced to sift through torturous evidence to present before a jury of New Yorkers still scarred by the strikes.

Friday's announcement also sent President Barack Obama's Republican foes but also some of his Democratic allies howling and was blasted by families of the nearly 3,000 victims of the strikes.

Attorney General Eric Holder vowed the co-conspirators would stand trial "before an impartial jury" and expressed confidence that "we're going to be successful in the prosecution efforts."

But some lawyers expressed doubts after the Obama administration announced that the five men, including mastermind Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, would be tried in a US federal

court in New York.

The trial will open just steps from Ground Zero, once the home to the World Trade Centre destroyed in the attacks.

"It is inconceivable that we would bring these alleged terrorists back to New York for trial, to the scene of the carnage they created eight years ago, and give them a platform to mock the suffering of their victims... and rally their followers to continue waging jihad against America," said Senator Joe Lieberman, an independent who usually votes with the Democrats.

Suzanne Lachelier, a military attorney for the men, said she was "very worried that it will not be possible to find jurors who have no opinion and who have not suffered from the attacks."

Beyond finding an objective jury in a city still traumatized by the attacks, a myriad of other problems face prosecutors, including the reliability of the evidence at hand.

9 killed as speeding train derails in India

AP, Jaipur

A speeding train derailed in western India early yesterday killing at least nine people and injuring more than 80 others.

Fifteen coaches of the New Delhi-bound train flew off tracks when its driver suddenly applied the brakes because of poor visibility in the region, said Vipin Kumar Pande, superintendent of police.

The accident occurred near Banskhov, a village nearly 40km south of Jaipur, the capital of Rajasthan state.

A broken rail track pierced an air-conditioned coach and

killed some of the passengers, Pande told The Associated Press.

Rescuers used equipment to cut open some of the coaches to free trapped passengers, he said. The injured were taken to a nearby hospital.

Accidents are common on India's sprawling rail network, one of the world's largest, with most blamed on poor maintenance.

Last month, a passenger train crashed into another train's rear carriage in northern India, killing 22 people and injuring 16 near Agra, the home of the Taj Mahal.



A crane is deployed at the site of the derailed Mandor Express train at Jhar village near Bassi about 35km from Jaipur yesterday. Several coaches of the overnight express between popular tourist destination Jodhpur and national capital New Delhi overturned around 1:34 am, killing nine people.



US Attorney General Eric Holder holds a press conference to announce that five men accused of the September 11 attacks will be tried in a New York civilian court at the Justice Department in Washington on Friday.

Chances of climate accord at Copenhagen summit slim

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

Hopes of a new climate change agreement at the UN summit in Copenhagen next month took a knock when the United States indicated that it would not sign such a deal without the Senate's clearance.

Visiting US Secretary of Energy Steven Chu said on Friday evening that "we cannot sign any treaty without the US Congress clearing the American Clean Energy and Security Act of 2009," which is America's effort to firm up a new course to clean energy economy.

He said the US did not want a repeat of the story of the Kyoto Protocol which was signed by it but not okayed by the Senate in 1998.

The then US vice president Al Gore had led his country's negotiations on the Kyoto Protocol in 1997 and Washington signed it in November 1998 but the Senate's refusal to

ratify the Protocol and the then President George W Bush's rejection of the accord made the US a non-signatory to it.

Given the sharp division in the Senate between the Democrats and the Republicans, it appears unlikely that the US Senate would pass the domestic law on reducing greenhouse gas emissions before the Copenhagen summit. The US commitment to cutting greenhouse gas emissions holds the key to clinching a deal at Copenhagen.

"We want to make sure that a situation like the Kyoto Protocol does not happen again", Chu said answering questions while speaking at the Indian Institute of Technology here.

The Copenhagen summit is expected to sign a global agreement to tackle the problem of climate change beyond the year 2012 when the Kyoto Protocol on cutting greenhouse gas expires.

Russian troops kill 20 militants in Chechnya

AP, Rostov-on-don

Government forces have killed more than 20 militants in Chechnya, and a bomb blast at a cemetery in a neighbouring province killed three relatives visiting the grave of a police officer slain by insurgents, law enforcement authorities said.

Chechnya's Kremlin-backed president said it was possible Chechen rebel leader Doku Umarov was among those killed Friday in the fighting in the province's southern mountains. President Ramzan Kadyrov said one of the dead was identified as a comrade who has often been at Umarov's side, according to his office, but he

cited no other evidence and said forensics experts would seek to identify other victims.

Chechen Interior Minister Magomed Deniyev said there were no casualties among government forces in the fighting. The reported toll was unusually high, but it comes amid an upsurge of violence in mostly Muslim Chechnya nearly a decade after Russian forces drove an independence-minded regional government from power in the second of two devastating separatist wars.

Neighbouring provinces in Russia's volatile North Caucasus are also plagued by violence, and Russian President Dmitry Medvedev singled out the region as a source of serious concern.

Russia ready to support Iran sanctions

AFP, Moscow

Russia is ready to support sanctions against Iran over its disputed nuclear programme, the daily Kommersant said yesterday citing sources in the administration of President Dmitry Medvedev.

"Recently our sources in the presidential administration are saying more often" that Moscow is "100 percent ready" to support sanctions against Iran, the newspaper wrote.

The international community has been ratcheting up pressure on Iran as the country ponders a UN-brokered proposal that could

help remove tensions over its nuclear programme.

According to the newspaper, "the last word on the eventual adoption of sanctions rests with the Russian and American presidents", Medvedev and Barack Obama, who were set to meet Sunday on the sidelines of the Asia-Pacific summit in Singapore.

"They won't only talk about the situation around the Iranian nuclear programme, but could also decide when sanctions should be imposed," said the newspaper.

Russia and China, both permanent UN Security Council members, have been sceptical about tightening sanctions on Iran.

Ahmedabad steps up hotel security

ANI, Ahmedabad

Security of hotels in Ahmedabad has been beefed up in the wake of reports that US terror suspect David Coleman Headley stayed at top-end hotels in various cities with the aim of conducting a rescue for terrorist attacks.

The Gujarat government has directed hotels to take thumb impressions of all guests and keep a copy of their identity cards.

Strain of Afghan war hits morale of US troops

AFP, Washington

A survey of US soldiers in Afghanistan shows declining morale and a reluctance to seek help for anxiety fuelled by repeated combat tours, the US Army said Friday.

A similar assessment in Iraq this year showed fewer soldiers suffering psychological problems compared to previous years, as violence levels there fell, the army said.

The findings came as

President Barack Obama faces a pivotal decision on sending additional forces to Afghanistan and amid renewed scrutiny of the mental fitness of American troops after the Fort Hood shootings last week.

The suspected gunman in the assault, Major Nidal Hasan, was due to deploy to Afghanistan and some of the victims in the shooting included his comrades also assigned to help soldiers

there traumatized by combat.

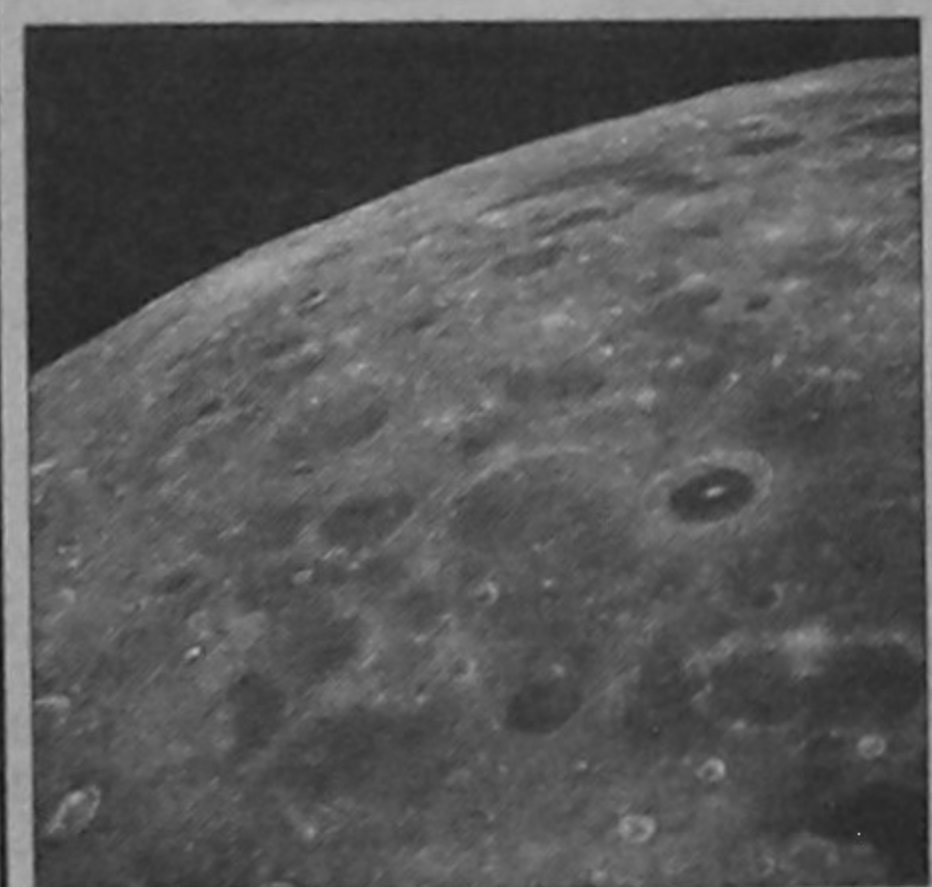
The mental health survey showed soldiers in Afghanistan "reported higher combat exposure and lower unit morale compared to previous years," the army said.

Only 5.7 percent of soldiers surveyed in Afghanistan rated morale for their units as high or very high, compared to 10.2 percent in 2007, according to the assessment.

Moon holds key to solar system's secrets

AFP, Washington

The moon, which is once again the focus of an international space race, could hold the key to the birth of our planet some 4.5 billion years ago, and help unlock the oldest secrets of the universe.



This undated Nasa handout image shows a view of the lunar surface taken from the Apollo 8 spacecraft looking southward from high altitude across the Southern Sea.

Forty years after American Neil Armstrong first walked on the moon, and as the United States aims to return astronauts to Earth's nearest neighbour by 2020, it remains an object of fascination and curiosity.

Friday's announcement that the US space agency has found "a significant amount" of water frozen deep in the moon's surface will re-ignite mankind's dreams of colonizing Earth's only satellite.

Part of the goal of once again returning to the moon -- some 384,402 kilometres (238,855 miles) from the Earth -- is to learn more about its hidden natural resources.

"The moon still has a great deal of scientific information left to be discovered that relates directly to our understanding of the history of the Earth and early history of other planets," geologist Harrison Schmitt told AFP earlier this year.

Schmitt landed on the moon in 1972 aboard the Apollo 17, the last manned mission to touch down on the lunar surface. He is among an elite group of 12 Americans who are the only people to have walked on the moon to date.

And as the Earth's natural resources gradually dwindle, some scientists believe the moon could prove a goldmine for future generations.

Warming brings early demise to a glacier

AFP, Chacaltaya

Once home to the highest ski resort in the world and now reduced to a rocky mountainside, Bolivia's Chacaltaya range bears powerful witness to the precipitous melting of glaciers.

The rusting remains of a ski lift now dominate what was once the highest ski-run in the world perched on the Chacaltaya glacier at some 5,300 meters (17,390 feet) high. Only a snowy ice cap of some 50 square meters (538 square feet) remains of the magnificent Chacaltaya glacier, which spread over 1,600 square meters in the 1950s.

"That's all there's left: a little piece of ice that is disappearing and will last no more than a year," said Alfredo Martinez, a veteran guide and founder of the Bolivian Andean Club.

Glancing at old black and white photographs, he recalled better times for his beloved Andean glacier, when ski competitions saw Argentine and Chilean athletes make the two-

hour trip from the capital La Paz on a narrow and winding road.

Martinez remembered the very last race, three years ago, on Chacaltaya's steep incline that delighted extreme sports enthusiasts.

But today, "it's a dead glacier," said Edson Ramirez, glaciologist at the Institute of Hydraulics and Hydrology in La Paz.

Skiers have now migrated to nearby Cerro Charquini, where they can still find enough snow.

Ramirez is part of a team of international scientists studying the Tropical Andes stretch of mountain range on horseback in Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador and Colombia.

The scientists, who have studied Chacaltaya for the past 15-20 years, had forecast it would completely disappear in 2015.

But with accelerated global warming spurring the ice to melt at the rate of six meters (20 feet) per year compared to about a meter in the 1940s, its demise has come six years earlier than expected.



A combo image created on Nov 9 shows a snow covered lodge (top) on Chacaltaya mountain, 40km from La Paz, taken on October 1, 1973 and a lodge in the same location (bottom) free from snow taken on Nov 9, 2009. Once home to the highest ski resort in the world and now reduced to a rocky mountainside, Bolivia's Chacaltaya range bears powerful witness to the precipitous melting of glacier.

News In Brief

Fugitive Thaksin departs Cambodia

AFP, Siem Reap

Fugitive former Thai premier Thaksin Shinawatra left Cambodia Saturday, officials said, concluding a trip that has stoked a major diplomatic crisis between the two neighbours.

Thaksin, who was toppled in a military coup in 2006 and is living abroad to avoid a jail term for corruption in Thailand, was seen by an AFP reporter departing the country Saturday morning by private jet.

Blair to face Iraq war inquiry

AFP, London

Former British prime minister Tony Blair is to be called to give evidence to an inquiry into the Iraq war, officials announced Friday, six years after he controversially backed the US-led invasion.

Blair will be among senior figures from the ruling Labour Party to go before the independent inquiry early next year, just months before Britain's next general election in June, which the party is tipped to lose.

Three killed in Thai south violence

AFP, Narathiwat

Suspected Islamic insurgents shot dead three civilians and six people have been injured in bomb and shooting attacks in Thailand's troubled south, police said Saturday.

They said a 49-year-old deputy village headman and a 52-year-old man were shot dead in an ambush early Saturday morning as they went to guard a wood processing plant in Narathiwat province.