



A boy with an anti nuclear poster attends a demonstration by pupils from a local school against nuclear waste storage yesterday in Luechow, northern Germany. Protests are planned against the upcoming Castor transport of nuclear waste to the storage facility in a salt deposit in Gorleben scheduled for this weekend.

PHOTO: AFP

Leaving polls wreckage, Obama flies to Asia

AFP, Washington

US President Barack Obama leaves the wreckage of his Democratic Party's election hammering for the refuge of foreign policy yesterday, setting off on a nine-day odyssey to Asia.

Obama will visit India, his boyhood home of Indonesia, South Korea for the G20 summit and then Japan for APEC meetings, seeking to broaden US geopolitical influence and win new markets for American products in the dynamic region.

With an eye on US voters back home, who used mid-term elections to send a cry of distress over the sluggish recovery, Obama will stress the commercial opportunities offered by Asia, as he seeks to boost exports to create jobs.

"The primary purpose (of the India trip) is to take a bunch of US companies and open up markets so that we can sell in Asia and some of the fastest-growing markets in the world, and we can create jobs here in the United States of America," Obama told reporters on Thursday.

"My hope is that we've got some specific announcements that show the connection between what we're doing overseas and what happens here at home when it comes to job growth and economic growth."

Obama, who has dubbed himself America's "First Pacific president" has

made no secret that he sees Asia with its fast-emerging economies and rising strategic clout, as the most vital global region to America's future.

In Mumbai, Obama will stay overnight today at the Taj Palace hotel, which was targeted by Islamic extremists in a bloody siege in November 2008, and make remarks to honor victims.

He will also give a speech to the business community and participate in roundtable events with entrepreneurs, before heading on to New Delhi where he will meet Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and address parliament.

The president will be in the unusual position of visiting a country where his predecessor George W Bush, who pushed a landmark civilian nuclear deal, is more popular than he is.

Obama, who hosted Singh at the White House in his debut state dinner, is expected to tell Indians that he views the relationship between the United States and the world's largest democracy as vital, despite seeking to improve ties with its rivals China and Pakistan.

The president has already made clear he has no plans on this trip to visit Pakistan, with which Washington has an uneasy anti-terror alliance, but plans to travel to Islamabad next year.

Security in India is extraordinarily tight

ahead of Obama's arrival, given that he is the highest-profile visitor since the deadly Mumbai attacks.

But US officials have blasted as "absolutely absurd" reports out of India that he will be protected by a vast armada of 34 US warships.

Next up is Indonesia, Obama's home for four years as a boy, where the highlight of his visit will be a tour of the largest mosque in Jakarta and a major speech, likely to build on his address to Muslims in Egypt last year.

Obama will stress that Indonesia is at the intersection of US efforts to reach out to the Muslim world and to connect with dynamic, fast-growing Southeast Asian economies.

The president arrives in Indonesia Tuesday and will have talks with President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono.

After a night in Indonesia, Obama will head to the G20 summit in Seoul and his latest bilateral meeting with President Hu Jintao at a time of flaring tensions between Washington and Beijing over China's currency and trade.

Both leaders may seek to defuse recent rhetorical spats, as they prepare for Hu's important visit to the United States in January, and will also likely seek to find new understanding on the North Korean nuclear crisis.

Cuba plane crash kills all 68 aboard

AP, Havana

A state airliner filled with Cubans and travellers from Europe and Latin America crashed and burst into flames in a mountainous area after declaring an emergency and losing contact with air traffic controllers. All 40 Cubans and 28 foreigners aboard died, authorities announced early yesterday.

AeroCaribbean Flight 883 was en route from the eastern city of Santiago de Cuba to the capital when it reported an emergency at 5:42pm local time Thursday, then lost contact with air traffic controllers. It went down near the village of Guasimal in Santi Spiritus province, carrying 61 passengers and a crew of seven.

Cuba's Civil Aviation Authority issued a statement hours later saying there were no survivors. It released a list of passengers that included nine Argentines, seven Mexicans, three Dutch citizens, two Germans, two Austrians, a French citizen, an Italian, a Spaniard, a Venezuelan and a Japanese. The seven member crew were all Cuban, as were 33 passengers.

A photo posted on the website of the local newspaper, Escambray, showed a large piece of the plane in flames, with rescue workers in olive-green military uniforms standing around it. It said the local Communist Party chief as well as Interior Ministry and other officials were at the scene helping with the effort.

The twice-a-week flight goes from Port-au-Prince, Haiti, to Santiago de Cuba to Havana. State media said that the plane was an ATR-72 twin turboprop and that the crash site was not far from the Zaza reservoir, the largest in Cuba. It said authorities had mobilized doctors and emergency workers in the rural area, which is about 220 miles (350 kilometers) east of Havana.

At Havana's national terminal, relatives of those on board the plane were kept isolated from other passengers and journalists.

"This is very sad," Caridad de las Mercedes Gonzalez, who was manning an airport information desk, said before officials announced that everyone had been killed. "We are very worried. This has taken us by surprise."

State media gave no details on what happened to the airliner, saying only that the cause of the crash was being investigated.

The flight would have been one of the last leaving Santiago de Cuba for Havana ahead of Tropical Storm Tomas, which was on a track to pass between Cuba's eastern end and the western coast of Haiti on Friday. Cuban media said earlier that flights and train service to Santiago were being suspended until the storm passed.

AeroCaribbean is owned by Cuban state airline Cubana de Aviacion.

The last passenger plane crash on the island occurred in March 2002, when a Soviet-made biplane carrying 16 people -- including 12 foreigners -- plunged into a small reservoir in central Cuba. The plane was operated by a small local charter company called Aerotaxi.

MIDTERM POLLS Democrats keep Senate seat from Washington state

AFP, Washington



Democratic Senator Patty Murray narrowly held her seat from Washington state, cushioning her party's majority in elections where Republicans made huge gains, results showed Thursday.

Murray's Republican opponent Dino Rossi conceded after the latest official tally showed Murray with a lead of some 46,000 votes, or 51.26 percent, from Tuesday's ballot.

"This evening, I called Senator Murray and congratulated her on her re-election to the US Senate," Rossi said in a statement.

"I ran for the Senate because I believe we need a basic course correction... That was a message that found a very receptive audience all across this state, though not quite as receptive enough."

The win from the northwest state left the Democratic side with 53 seats, including two who are independents but normally vote with the Democratic caucus -- and the Republicans with 46.

One more race remained undecided, in Alaska, where Republican Senator Lisa Murkowski -- who ran as a write-in candidate after losing in the primary -- was leading a three-way race with 41 percent.

But Murkowski said the results would not be clear until absentee ballots are counted, starting next week. She expressed confidence in winning.

"Our goal on election night was to end up with 40 percent of the vote and a lead of 10,000 votes in order to feel confident with our position heading into the count of absentee and question ballots that will occur over the next couple weeks," she said.

"We exceeded our goals with 41 percent of the vote and a lead of about 13,500 votes."

Republicans failed to capture the US Senate but cut deeply into the Democratic majority by picking up at least six seats in a Tuesday's vote that saw the House of Representatives swing to the Republicans.

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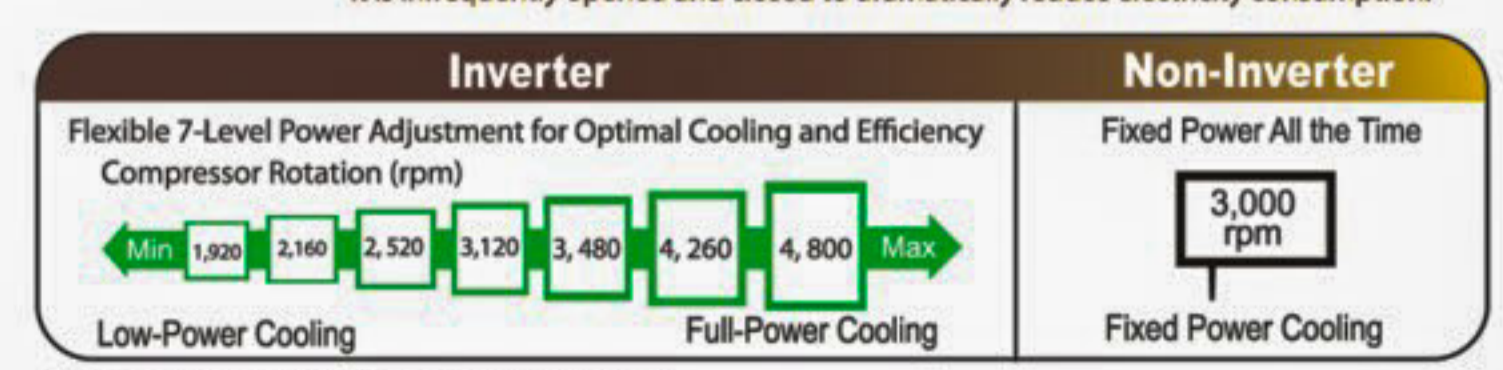


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