

# Gillard overlooks Asian partners ahead of Pacific Islands Forum

**JULIA Gillard has moved to address regional diplomatic concerns by upgrading Australia's representation to next week's Pacific Islands Forum - but she has failed to personally contact the leaders of our biggest trading partners, China and Japan.**

The Prime Minister's decision not to attend the 16-country Pacific summit in Vanuatu - and the possibility of not having ministerial representation - was causing concern in diplomatic circles.

Ms Gillard has struggled with foreign policy since becoming Prime Minister, failing to contact leaders of some of Australia's most important partners and not alerting Indonesia before announcing a plan to put a regional refugee processing centre in East Timor. Reports of a plan for Australia to fund the detention of asylum-seekers currently in the community in Indonesia have also caused confusion in Jakarta.

Australia is the outgoing chair of the Pacific Islands Forum, the nation's biggest regional responsibility. There has been consideration given to sending an ambassador to the meeting, as Australia did to the recent Afghan defence meeting in Kabul and the ASEAN meeting in Hanoi.

But last night senior government sources said it was now likely that Foreign Minister Stephen Smith would go. The minister's office has refused to indicate whether he would attend.

Representatives of Nauru and East Timor, as observers to the forum, are expected to attend the meeting as well as New Zealand Prime Minister John Key. All of these nations were named as being involved in the discussions for an East Timor refugee centre.

During previous election campaigns, Coalition foreign minister Alexander Downer attended two Pacific Islands Forums and during the 2001 campaign John Howard attended the APEC meeting in Shanghai as prime minister.

Government sources confirmed last night that an invitation to speak personally to the Chinese leadership had not been taken up by Ms Gillard because of logistic difficulties although she did speak to US President Barack Obama and Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono. She has not spoken to Japan's new Prime Minister, Naoto Kan.

Sources claimed the "caretaker" arrangements that took effect after the election was called prevented Ms Gillard making the leaders' calls she had planned.

Yesterday, a senior Indonesian government official told The Australian that talks with Jakarta on a solution to the asylum-seeker problem had been held at a low level and had not involved contact between political leaders.

Dino Djalal, a spokesman for Dr Yudhoyono and ambassador-designate to the US, said talks were being conducted at a "preliminary" level and as part of the Bali Process. This process, co-chaired by Indonesia and Australia, targets people-smuggling and trans-national crime.

Mr Djalal said he was unaware of any offer by Canberra to pay for an upgrade to detention facilities for asylum-seekers living at large in Indonesia.

Despite strong opposition from East Timor's parliament to a request for a processing centre to be built in the capital, Dili, Mr Smith said the federal government was pressing ahead with efforts to negotiate an agreement.

The opposition says the Timor plan is dead and it is time to reopen the processing centre in Nauru.

<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/national-affairs/foreign-affairs/gillard-overlooks-asian-partners-ahead-of-pacific-islands-forum/story-fn59nm2j-1225898722778>