

# PM slammed for ignoring forum

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## **THE PM's decision not to attend a Pacific leaders' forum has been branded as evidence Labor is not serious on its regional processing centre.**

The Coalition foreign affairs spokeswoman, Julie Bishop, has also declared the government should have sent a minister to this week's meetings on the Afghanistan peace process in Kabul and for ASEAN ministers in Hanoi.

Ms Bishop's claims come as concerns are growing among Australia's regional neighbours about refugee policies and the future of trade and foreign policy after Kevin Rudd's departure as prime minister.

On Monday night, the Prime Minister told ABC television she was giving regional relations priority and "would like to think that engagement in our region is what would stamp the Gillard government".

"I mean, this is where our future lies. This is where we've got to make our way in an ever-changing and very competitive, sometimes cut-throat world in terms of economic competition," she said.

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"We are a great trading nation. We can make the most of the opportunities in our region."

But when she called the election last weekend, the Prime Minister immediately decided she would not attend the Pacific Islands Forum, which will be attended by representatives of East Timor, Nauru and New Zealand, all concerned with the proposed regional processing centre for asylum-seekers.

Ms Bishop said yesterday it would be "ideal for the Prime Minister to attend the Pacific forum but, if she can't, then Foreign Minister Stephen Smith should attend".

"If Stephen Smith doesn't attend, then Labor will be shown not to be serious about the regional processing plan," she said.

Ms Bishop said there was "a clear national interest" to have a ministerial representative at the Kabul talks because of Australia's involvement in Afghanistan.

Because the election was announced, the government went into "caretaker" mode and ambassadors have been delegated to attend the international meetings.

A Foreign Affairs spokesman said the Australian delegation to the Kabul conference would be led by Ric Smith, special envoy to Afghanistan and Pakistan. The spokesman said the attendance at the meetings was in line with the rules governing an election period.

Australia's ASEAN envoy is expected to attend the ASEAN meeting in Hanoi this week.

Last week in Jakarta, Mr Smith briefed the Indonesian government on Ms Gillard's proposal for "a regional framework so far as people-smuggling and human trafficking is concerned, but also in particular our proposal for a regional processing centre".

Mr Smith also agreed with the Indonesian government to have a further meeting on the regional processing centre in East Timor during the ASEAN meeting in Hanoi this week.

The office of the Prime Minister said Ms Gillard could not attend the Pacific meeting because of the election.

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