

Obama: Forget Congress, I'll Close Gitmo Anyway

U.S. President Barack Obama vowed on Thursday to press ahead with the release of his plan on how he hopes to close the Guantanamo military prison but said last week's Paris attacks would stoke further congressional resistance to his efforts.

Obama drew a link between a bid by Republicans to block the inflow of Syrian refugees to the United States, based on concerns they could ignite Paris-style violence in American cities, and their opposition to the closing of the Guantanamo detention center at the U.S. Navy base in Cuba.

While attending an Asia-Pacific summit in Manila, he spoke amid fresh delays in his administration's submission to Congress of a plan aimed at meeting his long-standing pledge to shut the internationally condemned prison for foreign terrorism suspects.

"We can keep the American people safe while shutting down that operation," Obama told reporters at a joint appearance before reporters with Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau.

Obama predicted that the prison's population would be reduced to fewer than a hundred by early next year, an important symbolic milestone. The number has been whittled down to 107 prisoners, mostly through repatriations and transfers to third countries.

The Pentagon had been expected to unveil Obama's Guantanamo closure plan last week, before his departure for summits in Turkey and Southeast Asia, U.S. officials said. But that was held up without explanation, and Obama did not specify any new timeline.

The killing of 129 people in gun and bomb attacks last week in Paris in attacks claimed by Islamic State appears to have complicated Obama's Guantanamo strategy.

Some of Obama's Republican critics have called on him to drop the idea of closing Guantanamo, saying this is not the time to release more inmates overseas or bring them to U.S. prisons.

Obama equated that with calls from Republicans who say that the U.S. acceptance of Syrian refugees should be restricted because militants might slip into the country and carry out attacks, an argument he has dismissed as politically motivated.

He reiterated his view that Guantanamo has been "an enormous recruitment tool" for groups like Islamic State, which has seized swathes of Syria and Iraq.

"We are going to go through meticulously, with Congress, what our options are and why we think this should be closed," Obama said.

"I guarantee you there will be strong resistance, because in the aftermath of Paris, I think that there is just a very strong tendency for us to get worked up around issues that don't actually make us safer."

Republicans who control Congress have vowed to block Obama's efforts to transfer any detainees to the United States from Guantanamo, which was opened by his predecessor, George W. Bush, after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks.

The White House has not ruled out the possibility that Obama could use executive powers to shut the prison, but some lawmakers have vowed legal action if he takes that route.

(Reporting by Matt Spetalnick; Editing by David Ljunggren and Nick Macfie)

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