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In speech, Obama to argue for immigration overhaul

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WASHINGTON — President Barack Obama hopes to rally new momentum behind the push for an immigration overhaul by explaining why he thinks a comprehensive approach is the only way to fix what he and others say is a system badly in need of repair.

Obama was laying out his rationale in a speech Thursday, his first as president on the issue.

Obama wasn't expected to announce any new proposals or policy changes. But feeling pressure from a range of supporters, he was aiming to jump-start the effort he had promised to make a priority in his first year and which advocates had hoped would be completed by now.

The speech follows up on back-to-back meetings Obama had with advocates and lawmakers at the White House this week.

Obama has said a comprehensive solution means "accountability for everybody" — from the U.S. government meeting its obligation to secure the border, to businesses facing the consequences of knowingly employing illegal immigrants, to those who enter the country illegally owning up to their actions before they can begin the process of becoming citizens.

Recent developments on immigration influenced his decision to give a speech, White House officials say, most notably Arizona's enactment of a tough anti-immigrant law and protests across the country against it.

"He thought this was a good time to talk plainly with the American people about his views on immigration," spokesman Bill Burton said.

Still, prospects appear bleak for getting a bill to Obama's desk before lawmakers leave town in the fall to campaign for re-election in November, and the president could be partly responsible for that. In April, he gave lawmakers some wiggle room when he said Congress may not have the appetite to deal with immigration this year following a tough legislative year in 2009.

The political reality is that to get a bill Obama needs Republican support, mostly in the Senate, where Democrats fall short of the 60 votes needed to overcome GOP stalling tactics. Obama has mentioned that lack of cross-party support in his recent comments on immigration.

"I've got to have some support from Republicans," he said at a May news conference with visiting Mexican President Felipe Calderon.

Obama has endorsed a proposal by Sens. Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., and Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., that would require illegal immigrants, among other things, to admit they broke the law, pay fines and back taxes and perform community service to eventually obtain legal status. But Graham since has balked at acting on immigration this year, and no other Senate Republican has come forward.

Some Republicans want to act first on measures to tighten security along the U.S.-Mexico border, but Obama disagrees with that approach. His administration has acted to improve border security, including increasing personnel and equipment along the border.

Obama recently ordered 1,200 National Guard troops to the border to boost security and asked Congress for an additional \$600 million to support personnel and improve technology there. More than 500 of those Guard troops are to be sent to Arizona.

The Arizona law requires police enforcing another statute to clarify a person's immigration status if there's reason to believe the individual is in the U.S. illegally. Several states and communities are considering similar legislation, which Obama says is an understandable byproduct of the public's frustration over the federal government's inability to tighten the immigration system.

But Obama also has criticized the law as "misguided" and said it is potentially discriminatory. He has asked the Justice Department to review its legality and immigrant advocates are hoping the government will sue Arizona to block the law from taking effect later this month.