

Obama challenges charges about radical Islamic school

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON — Sen. Barack Obama fought back Wednesday against an allegation that he was educated at a radical Islamic school as a child in Indonesia, determined to avoid being tripped up by unsubstantiated charges like those that undermined John Kerry in 2004.

Interviews by The Associated Press at the elementary school in Jakarta found that it's a public and secular institution that has been open to students of all faiths since before the White House hopeful attended in the late 1960s.

Obama, who was born in Hawaii, moved to Indonesia at age 6 to live with his mother and stepfather, attending schools in the country until age 10, when he returned to Hawaii to live with his maternal grandparents.

"The allegations are completely baseless," said Akmad Solichin, the vice principal at SDN Menteng 1, who added, "Yes, most of our students are Muslim, but there are Christians as well. Everyone's welcome here ... it's a public school."

A spokesman for Indonesia's Ministry of Religious Affairs said claims that Obama studied at an Islamic school are groundless.

"SDN Menteng 1 is a public primary school that is open to people of all faiths," said the spokesman, Sutopo, who goes by only one name. "Moreover, he studied earlier at Fransiskus Assisi, which is clearly a Catholic school."

The contention that Obama was educated at a radical Muslim madrassa surfaced on the Web site of the conservative Insight magazine the day after Obama announced he was jumping into the 2008 presidential race. Conservative Internet blogs and the



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In this undated handout photo made available by the SDN Menteng School 1, U.S. presidential candidate Sen. Barack Obama is shown circled in yellow in a group photo during a graduation ceremony at the SDN Menteng 1 school in Jakarta, Indonesia. Obama attended the school when he was a child living in Indonesia.

On the Web

barackobama.com

Fox News Channel picked up the story and spread the charges just as his candidacy was getting off the ground.

Obama called the reports "scurrilous," and his communications director emailed reporters a lengthy memo attempting to set the record straight.

The pushback was a signal Obama would fight to protect his reputation in the presidential campaign.

Many Democrats argued that Kerry's failure to challenge aggressively his critics in the 2004 presidential race cost him in his effort to unseat President Bush. A group with conservative ties, the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth, charged that Kerry did not deserve the medals he won in the Vietnam War — despite his combat record of bravery and valor. Kerry announced Wednesday that

he will not run again in 2008.

"We will not be swift-boated," said Obama communications director Robert Gibbs. "And we won't take allegations that are patently untrue lying down."

Obama's mother, divorced from Obama's father, married a man from Indonesia named Lolo Soetoro, and the family relocated to the country from 1967-71. At first, Obama attended the Catholic school, Fransiskus Assisi, where documents showed he enrolled as a Muslim, the religion of his stepfather.

The document required each student choose one of five state-sanctioned religions when registering — Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Catholic or Protestant. Gibbs said he wasn't sure why the document had Obama listed as a Muslim.

"Senator Obama has never been a Muslim," Gibbs said. "As a 6-year-old in Catholic school, he studied the catechism."

The senator is a member of the United Church of Christ.

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