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Taiwan's Lee Visits Japan Despite Beijing Protest

By REUTERS**Filed at 2:00 a.m. ET**

TOKYO (Reuters) - Former Taiwan president Lee Teng-hui, despised by China for asserting the self-ruled island's sovereignty, arrived in Japan on Wednesday for a trip that has already sparked protest from Beijing.

Japan said this week that the visit was for tourism only and should have no impact on its ties with China, but the 84-year-old Lee is scheduled to give speeches and a news conference in Tokyo during the 11-day stay.

Lee, who was the Taiwanese leader from 1988 to 2000, has been to Japan twice after stepping down, the last time in January 2005, but had stayed away from the capital and refrained from speaking in public.

"It'll be my first time in Tokyo in 22 years. I am looking forward to it a lot," Lee told reporters after arriving at an airport just outside of Tokyo, where he was greeted by supporters chanting "banzai" (long life).

Lee denied speculation that he may meet Japanese politicians, but did say he would visit Tokyo's Yasukuni war shrine, seen by many in Asia as a symbol of Japan's past militarism.

The shrine honors Japan's war dead -- among them soldiers from Taiwan and Korea who fought for Japan, their colonial ruler at the time -- but also some convicted war criminals including wartime prime minister Hideki Tojo.

Lee's older brother died fighting for the Japanese military.

"As for Yasukuni, I have not set a time yet, but I have to see my big brother."

The former president had planned another Japan trip for September 2006, but cancelled it citing health reasons after Beijing told Tokyo it would harm their relationship.

On Tuesday, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Jiang Yu said Beijing had made a "solemn representation" to Japan over the latest visit.

"We strongly demand Japan attach importance to China's serious concern ... and not provide political stages to Taiwan independence elements or forces," Jiang told reporters.

Lee, who will be traveling with his wife, did not apply for a visa as Japan has waived visas for short-term tourists from Taiwan since 2005.

During his stay, Japan-educated Lee will also receive a prize in memory of Japanese colonial administrator Shinpei Goto, and tour a series of Japanese temples throughout the country.

Beijing has claimed sovereignty over Taiwan and demanded that it accept reunification ever since 1949 when the Nationalist forces fled to the island after losing power on the mainland to the Communists.

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