

Ex South Korea first lady returns from North without meeting Kim

By Kim Tong-hyung
The Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea — The 92-year-old widow of former South Korean President and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Kim Dae-jung returned to Seoul after a four-day visit to North Korea that ended without a meeting with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un.

Lee Hee-ho told reporters that she wasn't carrying out any official duty on behalf of South Korea during her trip. There was no contact from Kim Jong Un during her stay in North Korea, although he sent a message of welcome through a North Korean official who met Lee at the airport in Pyongyang, according to Lee's aides.

Her itinerary released to the media included visits to a maternity clinic, orphanage, and children's hospital, but not any formal meetings with senior North Korean officials. Some analysts had speculated there could be a chance Kim Jong Un might meet her or try to send a message to Seoul through her.

Lee described meeting children at facilities in Pyongyang as an emotional experience that reinforced her belief that the Koreans "must not pass the pain of division to the next generation."

Relations between the rival Koreas have been testy following the recent opening of a U.N. office in Seoul tasked with monitoring North Korea's human-rights situation and the North's refusal to release several South Koreans detained there.

Before she left for Pyongyang, Lee expressed hope that her visit would pave the way for more exchanges between the countries. Kim Jong Un's failure to meet Lee during her North Korean stay raises further questions about his skills in diplomacy and his enthusiasm for improving inter-Korean ties, said Cheong Seong-Chang, a North Korea expert at South Korea's Sejong Institute.

Kim Jong Un decided against travelling to Moscow to attend the May celebrations marking the 70th anniversary of the Soviet Union's victory over Nazi Germany and sent the country's nominal head of state, Kim Yong Nam, in his place. Kim Jong Un also snubbed Mongolian President Tsakhiagiin Elbegdorj when he travelled to North Korea in 2013 and has been rarely seen with high-profile foreign visitors other than former U.S. basketball star Dennis Rodman.

Kim Dae-jung, who died in 2009, backed a policy of



UNOFFICIAL DIPLOMACY FAILS. Lee Hee-ho, the widow of former South Korean President and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Kim Dae-jung, receives a bouquet of flowers from a supporter at Gimpo International Airport in Seoul, South Korea, upon returning from North Korea. Lee returned to Seoul after a four-day visit to North Korea that apparently ended without a meeting with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un. Lee told reporters that she wasn't carrying out any official duty on behalf of South Korea during her trip. (AP Photo/Lee Jin-man)

rapprochement with Pyongyang and held a landmark summit with Kim Jong Un's father and late North Korean leader Kim Jong Il in 2000. He won the Nobel Peace Prize later that year for his efforts.

The summit talks spawned a flurry of cooperation projects, but most of them have been put on hold since conservatives took power in Seoul in 2008 and ended big aid shipments to North Korea.

North Korea is particularly keen on reopening the country to South Korean tourists, along with pursuing business and investment deals with its more affluent southern neighbor.

Last year, Kim Jong Un invited Lee to visit after thanking her for sending condolence flowers on the third anniversary of the death of his father. Kim Jong Un and Lee briefly met in December 2011, when Lee visited North Korea to attend the funeral of Kim Jong Il.

Japanese girl's World War II job: Waving goodbye to kamikaze pilots

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views made in the late 1980s.

Reiko Akabane, a Nadeshiko who died in 2006, said in the video that she went up to one of the pilots before his departure, to return change from the money he had given her to mail a letter to his parents. Instead of taking the coins, Shinji Sakaguchi took out his wallet and handed it to her as a keepsake.

Another pilot who was standing by, Nobuo Taniguchi, regretted that he had nothing to give her. He stooped down and picked up two small smooth rocks.

"These are the last stones that were under my feet," Akabane recalled him as saying.

The wallet and rocks are on display at a small cottage-like building called Firefly Hall in Chiran. It's a replica of a restaurant run by Tome Torihama, a woman many pilots came to see as their mother figure, and it was built by Torihama's grandson in 2000.

The source of the building's name is a 19-year-old pilot named Saburo Miyagawa. He had promised Torihama he would come back as a firefly, and right about the time his plane sank into the ocean, a particularly big glowing bug flew into the garden of Torihama's restaurant.

The firefly is an image often used in Japan to symbolize the kamikaze and death because of its association with love, poetry, and a very short life.

"They were all people who went straight to heaven," said Torihama in the museum video. "They were all gentle. I wanted to make them all my children."

The pilots confided their deepest fears to Torihama and



SAYING SAYONARA. In this image taken from Associated Press Television video, Akihisa Torihama shows a 1945 photograph of his grandmother, Tome Torihama, center, with tokko pilots in Chiran in Kagoshima prefecture, southwest of Japan. Chiran served as a takeoff spot for Army pilots on a suicide-attack mission in the closing days of World War II. Torihama, who died in 1992, was a mother figure for many of the pilots. (AP Photo/APTN, Miki Toda)

some Nadeshiko. Torihama died in 1992, at 89.

According to the museum, when the girls went to pick up the pilots' pillowcases to wash, they found they were drenched in tears.

But when they took off to their certain death, they put on brave fronts. Kuwashiro thought they resembled living angels.

"They looked brave," she said. "They didn't have sad faces."

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