

President-Elect Lee Vows Closer Relations With US

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Rep. Chung Mong-joon, the special envoy of President-elect Lee Myung-bak, said Tuesday in Washington that he will deliver a letter to U.S. President George W. Bush from Lee, which contains Seoul's will to strengthen relations with Washington.

"South Korea-U.S. relations have been seriously damaged because there has been a lack of sincere dialogue between the two sides," Chung said. "As the U.S. must have a lot to say to our government, we will first listen closely before coming up with our position."

The five-term lawmaker's remark is based on Lee's belief that bilateral relations have suffered serious damage under the liberal Roh Moo-hyun and Kim Dae-jung administrations.

"I will relay President-elect Lee's firm determination to improve the Korea-U.S. alliance to the U.S.," Chung said.

The special envoy had a meeting with Christopher Hill, the U.S. top nuclear negotiator, on Monday in Washington to discuss ways to denuclearize North Korea, which has not kept its promise to declare its nuclear weapons programs yet.

Chung will also discuss ratification of the Korea-U.S. free trade agreement (FTA) and Korea's entry into the U.S. visa waiver program with U.S. officials. He will also help arrange a summit between Lee and Bush in March in Washington. The envoy will meet with U.S. Deputy Secretary of State John Negroponte on behalf of Secretary Condoleezza Rice, who is on an overseas trip, National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley and Secretary of Defense Robert Gates. He will meet with lawmakers working on foreign affairs including Republican senators Chuck Hagel and Richard Lugar and officials of think-tank organizations in Washington.

However, no schedule was arranged for a meeting with Bush who has just finished a Middle East tour, according to Lee's transition team.

Traveling to New York City on Thursday, Chung will meet financiers on Wall Street and journalists. He will return home Saturday. He is accompanied by Rep. Hwang Jin-ha of the Grand National Party (GNP), former Foreign Minister Han Seung-joo and Kim Woo-sang, an international politics professor of Yonsei University and adviser to the transition team. He is Lee's fourth envoy to the four neighboring countries of Japan, China, Russia and the United States. Rep. Lee Jae-oh, who went to Russia as a special envoy last Saturday, delivered a letter to Russian President Vladimir Putin Monday via Putin's foreign affairs adviser. Lee couldn't meet Putin because he was on the campaign trail.

Lee Jae-oh delivered President-elect Lee's intention to visit Russia as soon as possible in order to expand cooperation among the two Koreas and Russia.

”Lee Jae-oh will mainly discuss ways to increase bilateral trade and Korean companies' direct investment in Russia with Russian officials,” a transition team member said. During the six-day visit, Lee will also visit Vladivostok to discuss the joint development of oil fields, the Trans-Korean Railway (TKR) and Trans-Siberian Railroad (TSR). The envoy will explain President-elect Lee's plan to forge a Northeast Asian economic community.

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