

## Japanese representative to Taiwan Saito resigns

Written by Taipei Times

Wednesday, 02 December 2009 08:04 -

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Japan's Interchange Association — Tokyo's representative office — confirmed yesterday that Representative Masaki Saito has resigned but said the resignation would not take effect until its board of directors approves it.

There was immediate speculation that the career diplomat's surprise move was linked to remarks he made at an academic conference in May at National Chung Cheng University, remarks that were widely criticized at the time by Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) lawmakers.

Speaking at the annual meeting of the Republic of China International Relations Association, Saito said Taiwan's status was "still unresolved."

The envoy apologized later for his remarks and Tokyo said Saito's comments were his own views and did not represent the Japanese government.

While KMT members attacked him, accusing him of spreading false information about Taiwan, independence supporters hailed him for "speaking the truth."

Shinji Hiyama, the cultural liaison of the Interchange Association, refused to comment on Saito's resignation except to say Saito was leaving his post for "personal reasons."

It was not clear exactly when Saito tendered his resignation or when he would leave Taiwan.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs said it had no information about Saito's departure.

"The foreign ministry has no information about it and it will respect the decision of the Japanese government," Deputy Secretary-General of the Association of East Asia Relations Nien Shin-shyh (聶震中) told a routine ministry press conference.

Ministry spokesman Henry Chen (陳亨利) said Taiwan does not interfere with the decision-making process regarding foreign ambassadors' postings and he stressed that Saito's departure would not hurt Taiwan-Japan relations.

KMT Legislator John Chiang (蔣經國), a former foreign minister, said he "was not surprised" by the news because Saito's resignation had been expected since the controversy.

Chiang, who is a member of the Foreign and National Defense Committee, said Saito had lost all credibility and the ability to function as a diplomat because "hardly anyone in the administration and the legislature was willing to meet him."

"It was unfathomable that a professional diplomat would make such negative remarks toward the country in which he was serving. His resignation was only a matter of time," Chiang said.

Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) lawmakers, however, said Saito's leaving showed that

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President Ma Ying-jeou's (馬英九) "China-friendly" foreign policy had interfered with Taiwan's effort to have "substantive relations" with non-allies.

"We are very saddened and disappointed by this outcome. We are very thankful for Saito's willingness to stand up for Taiwan," DPP Legislator Tsai Huang-liang (蔡煌良) said, adding that Taiwan-Japan ties were at their "lowest point" in a decade.

DPP Legislator Yeh Yi-jin (葉宜金) said Saito's resignation brought shame to Taiwan and the administration must change its China-centric attitude before ruining the nation's friendship with other countries.

The government's indirect boycott of Saito was the main reason for his departure, Yeh said.

China's influence could have also driven Saito away because ousting a diplomat that believes Taiwan's status was unresolved fits Beijing's interests, DPP Legislator Kuan Bi-ling (關基銘) said.

KMT Legislator Lee Hung-chun (李鴻章), who heads the Taiwan-Japan Parliamentary Friendship Group and is on a visit to Hokkaido, said yesterday that he had learned of Saito's resignation a few days ago.

In addition to the uproar caused by his remarks, Saito felt this was the right time to retire because of the birth of his grandchild, Lee said.

Source: [Taipei Times 2009/12/02](#)