

American Family Begs North Korea for 'Mercy' in Bible Case

The family of an Ohio man being held in North Korea pleaded on Tuesday for his release and said they are urgently seeking help from U.S. government leaders.

North Korea, officially known as the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, said in June it had detained Jeffrey Fowle, a married father of three from Miamisburg, Ohio, for violating its laws after entering the country as a tourist.

"The family would like to express its heartfelt apology to the people and the government of the DPRK," the Fowle family's attorney, Timothy Tepe, said in a statement.

"Jeff has apologized publicly for his actions and Jeffrey's family petitions the government of the DPRK for mercy toward Jeffrey and asks for his release," Tepe said.

Fowle had entered North Korea in late April on a tour and was described by fellow travelers as warm and amiable. A source familiar with the Fowle case told Reuters earlier in August that authorities arrested him for leaving a Bible under a bin in the bathroom at a club for foreign sailors in Chongjin.

A cleaner found the package and alerted local authorities.

Fowle was arrested on May 7 at an airport where he was due to board a flight out of North Korea. That brought to three the number of U.S. citizens held by Pyongyang.

The North said in April it was holding Matthew Todd Miller, who it said had made "a gross violation of its legal order" after entering the country on a tourist visa. In June it said it would put Fowle and Miller on trial.

North Korea is also holding Kenneth Bae, a Korean-American missionary sentenced to 15 years of hard labor on charges of trying to use religion to overthrow its political system.

“The next few days are critical as we approach the trial date set for Jeffrey, and the family is urgently seeking assistance from our government leaders,” Tepe said.

He said Fowle’s wife and children have received a letter and phone call from him. All have written to President Barack Obama seeking help, Tepe said.

North Korean citizens are taught to revere the country’s leaders with a religious-like fervor. The isolated communist country takes a hard line on Christians proselytizing within its borders and has used detained foreigners to win economic concessions.

Thousands of tourists travel to North Korea each year, bringing foreign hard currency to the nation where foreign commerce has been severely hit by international sanctions largely imposed because of the rogue nation’s pursuit of nuclear weapons.

Tourists are kept removed from the general public, and tours typically are tightly controlled.

Reporting by David Bailey in Minneapolis; editing by Eric Beech

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