

Church, Government Fervently Interceding for Detained Pastor

The Canadian government and one of the country's largest churches said on Thursday they hope the sentencing of a pastor to a life of hard labor in North Korea will at least bring new avenues of consular access after months without contact.

They also said they hoped for the quick release of the pastor, South Korea-born Hyeon Soo Lim. Lim, held by North Korea since February, was sentenced to hard labor for life for subversion, North Korea's official KCNA news agency reported on Wednesday, a sentence Canada called "unduly harsh."

The conclusion of the trial of Lim, who had been traveling to North Korea since 1997, could finally allow Canadian officials to visit the 60-year-old pastor – and possibly secure his release, a spokesman for Canada's foreign affairs department said on Thursday.

"Our priority now is to get access to Mr. Lim. Canadian officials are ... aggressively working on that as we speak, and then to work on next steps with the North Korean government with the hope that he'll be returned to Canada as soon as is possible," spokesman Adam Barratt said.

He said Canada's requests for access to Lim to check on his health and convey messages from his family and congregation have been repeatedly denied by North Korea.

Lim had been doing humanitarian work in North Korea since 1997, according to his Toronto church, the 3,000-member Light Korean Presbyterian Church.

North Korea's highest court said Lim had attempted to

overthrow the government and undermine its social system with “religious activities” for the past 18 years, China’s official Xinhua news agency reported.

North Korea had previously sentenced Korean-American missionary Kenneth Bae to 15 years of hard labor but released him last year after holding him for two years. Lim’s church said they hope Lim’s sentencing will bring similar relief.

“We hope that he knows that there is a global community who is praying for him and also working hard to secure his release. We hope that he remembers his family and congregation and how much they love him,” church spokeswoman Lisa Pak said in an email.

Lim, who has lived in Canada since 1986 and is a Canadian citizen, is the only Western citizen known to be held currently in North Korea.

Both North Korea and neighboring China have clamped down on Christian groups in recent years. Last year, Pyongyang released three detained Americans, including Bae and another man who had left a copy of the Bible at a club. {eo}

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