

Church Says Detained Pastor Has No Ties to Purged North Korean Officials

A Canadian pastor detained in North Korea has done only humanitarian work there, his church said on Friday as it denied a media report that he had ties to a purged and executed uncle of North Korean leader Kim Jong-un.

The Rev. Hyeon Soo Lim, 60, the leader of the 3,000-member Light Korean Presbyterian Church in suburban Toronto, was last heard from on Jan. 31 and is believed to be the Canadian who diplomats have confirmed is being detained by North Korean authorities.

Church spokeswoman Lisa Pak denied a media report that Lim's projects were linked to people who knew Jang Song-Thaek, the purged and executed uncle of Kim Jong-un. She said Lim visited North Korea more than 100 times, including since the execution of the uncle.

"The overall focus of his mission there has never been political, it has always been to help people," Pak said.

"He has obeyed the rules of the government. We are clearly a Christian group, but we have never asserted that there," she said. "We have done all we can for the last two decades to help with humanitarian projects. We did not ever mean any harm."

Pak said the church is confident Ottawa is working for Lim's release, though she said it unclear what diplomatic discussions are taking place.

Canada suspended diplomatic ties with Pyongyang in 2010, leaving it with limited influence there.

Sweden, which has an embassy in Pyongyang and provides some diplomatic services for Canada, said on Friday that its ambassador is pressing for a meeting with a Canadian citizen detained by the isolated state. It declined to confirm the identity of the person.

Canada advises against travel to North Korea, partly because it has limited ability to provide consular assistance there.

Both North Korea and China have clamped down on Christian groups over the past year, and several American Christians have been detained by North Korea. Last month, China formally detained a Canadian man, Kevin Garratt, on suspicion of stealing state secrets.

Pak said that Lim helps oversee a nursing home, a nursery and an orphanage in the Rajin region, with his most recent visit in late 2014.

“We ask them to consider all the work he has done. There is nothing he has done that should cause them to detain him, but we don’t want to push the government either and we just want them to come to the same conclusion,” she said.

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