

Dennis Rodman Apologizes for Remarks About Imprisoned US Missionary

Retired U.S. basketball star Dennis Rodman said in a published statement on Thursday that he had been drinking when he suggested that an American jailed by North Korea was himself to blame for landing in prison.

Rodman, who calls himself a friend of North Korean dictator Kim Jong Un, caused a furor with his comments on an American missionary imprisoned by Pyongyang. He is visiting North Korea with fellow U.S. basketball players.

In a statement issued by his public relations firm in the United States, Rodman said:

“I want to apologize. I take full responsibility for my actions. It had been a very stressful day. Some of my teammates were leaving because of pressure from their families and business associates. My dreams of basketball diplomacy were quickly falling apart. I had been drinking. It’s not an excuse but by time the interview happened I was upset. I was overwhelmed.”

He added: “I embarrassed a lot of people. I’m very sorry. At this point I should know better than to make political statements. I’m truly sorry.”

Rodman’s current visit to North Korea, his fourth, has drawn criticism from human rights activists and the family of imprisoned U.S. missionary Kenneth Bae after Rodman appeared to suggest in an interview peppered with obscenities that Bae, rather than the North Korean authorities, was responsible for his incarceration.

Bae's sister, Terri Chung, has said her family was outraged by Rodman's comments and that he should use his access to the North Korean leader to advocate on Bae's behalf, rather than "hurl outrageous accusations."

"It is clear to me, however, that there is nothing diplomatic about his trip," Chung said in a statement Thursday. "He is playing games with my brother's life."

Bae, 45, was sentenced to 15 years hard labor for state subversion in North Korea, where he was detained in 2012 while leading a tour group. The Supreme Court said he used his tourism business to form groups aimed at overthrowing the government.

On Thursday, Rodman accompanied Kim on a trip to a luxury ski resort.

A source with direct knowledge of Rodman's itinerary said the 52-year-old took a helicopter to a new multibillion-dollar resort which is one of Kim's showcase projects and which has been condemned as a waste of money in a country where most people are malnourished.

The source declined to be identified due to the sensitivity of the issue.

On Wednesday, Rodman led a chorus singing "Happy Birthday" to the leader of the isolated and heavily sanctioned country at a basketball match that Kim attended with his wife.

North Korean state media said the song was "reflecting (Rodman's) reverence" for Kim Jong Un, and that he had organized the game as a gift for his birthday, confirming for the first time the leader's date of birth. He is believed to be 31.

The Rodong Sinmun, the official newspaper of North Korea's ruling Workers' Party, dedicated its front page to coverage of

the basketball game and published photos of Kim sitting and laughing with Rodman.

“Dennis Rodman said he was overjoyed and teared up when he met the Dear Respected Marshal again,” the newspaper said.

Starved, Beaten, Abused

The fading basketball star’s trips had been financed by Irish bookmaker Paddy Power, although it has now withdrawn its funding.

It is not known whether Rodman has the capacity to fund another trip. North Korea rarely pays for this kind of visit, according to experts on the country.

Rodman has described Kim, who has been in power for just over two years, as his friend.

Kim has presided over two long-range rocket launches—banned under U.N. sanctions due to Pyongyang’s nuclear weapons and proliferation efforts—a nuclear test and last year threatened to attack South Korea, Japan and the United States.

Last month, his uncle Jang Song Thaek was executed in one of the biggest and most public purges undertaken in North Korea, which has been ruled by the same family for three generations.

Jang is just one of hundreds of thousands North Koreans who have faced death or imprisonment in the North. An estimated 150,000-200,000 people are in political prisons and forced labor camps, according to rights activists.

Defectors have testified to summary executions and rampant human rights abuses on North Korea. They say they were starved, beaten and abused in work camps where many die and that babies born in the camps were killed.

While North Koreans suffer from food shortages and malnutrition, according to U.N. assessments, Kim has pushed ahead with big building projects such as the Masik Ski Resort

that Rodman visited.

South Korean officials estimate it cost hundreds of millions of dollars to build and North Korea aims to make \$ million in annual profit from the resort, according to documents prepared for potential foreign investors. It expects up to 5,000 skiers to visit per day.

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