

Missionary Still Locked Up in North Korea, but US Isn't Giving Up

The United States is still hopeful of securing the release of an American missionary being held in North Korea, the U.S. human rights envoy for the country said on Thursday, even though two trips he has had scheduled for the purpose have been canceled.

Ambassador Robert King said there had been no progress on the Kenneth Bae case since his last trip was called off in February.

"We are hopeful; we continue to press," King told Reuters. "I have had two trips canceled, but we are hopeful that the right circumstances will occur and we will be able to do something."

King also said the United States has yet to decide whether to press for North Korea to be referred to the International Criminal Court after a report from a United Nations panel last month accused the reclusive state of crimes against humanity that evoked Nazi-era atrocities.

Analysts say such a move would likely provoke a veto by North Korea's main ally, China, something the United States might wish to avoid.

"We are considering; we haven't made a decision on that," King said when asked about the issue.

North Korea has detained Bae, a 45-year-old Korean American, for more than a year and sentenced him to 15 years of hard labor on charges of trying to overthrow the state.

North Korea rejected an offer for King, the U.S. special envoy for North Korean human rights issues, to visit Pyongyang to

discuss Bae's case last August and rescinded an invitation for him to visit last month.

The White House said last month it was "deeply disappointed" by North Korea's decision and it remained prepared to send King.

In spite of the lack of progress in the Bae case, North Korea this week freed an elderly Australian missionary it had arrested last month.

The Australian was accused by Pyongyang of committing a crime by distributing bible tracts at a Buddhist temple in Pyongyang on the birthday of former North Korean leader Kim Jong Il.

North Korea said it had decided to deport the 75-year-old, partly in consideration of his age, and issued what it said was a picture of a handwritten note from him apologizing for his act.

The U.S. State Department said last month that Bae was moved from a hospital back to a labor camp on January 20, the same day he appealed publicly for Washington to help get him home.

While North Korea technically espouses freedom of religion, it is ranked as one of the world's most oppressive regimes in that regard, as highlighted by the report from the U.N. panel.

Although Washington sponsored the report, analysts said it remains unclear whether the White House will risk adding friction to relations with China by call for a referral to the ICC.

North Korea rejected the findings of the panel, saying they were based on "lies and fabrications deliberately cooked up by hostile forces and riff-raffs."

