

North Korea Sentences US Christian to 15 Years Hard Labor

North Korea sentenced U.S. citizen Kenneth Bae to 15 years hard labor on Thursday for what it said were crimes against the state, a move that will likely see him used as a bargaining chip in talks with Washington.

Bae, 44, was born in South Korea but is a naturalized American citizen and attended the University of Oregon. According to U.S. media, he most recently lived in the Seattle suburb of Lynnwood.

A North Korean defector said Bae will likely serve his sentence in a special facility for foreigners, not in one of the repressive state's forced labor camps. More than 200,000 people are incarcerated in these camps, beaten and starved, sometimes to death, according to human rights bodies.

Bae's sentencing comes after two months of saber-rattling by Pyongyang that saw North Korea threaten both the United States and South Korea with nuclear war.

Bae is believed to be a devout Christian, according to human rights activists in South Korea, who say he may have been arrested for taking pictures of starving children, known as *kotjebi* or fluttering swallows.

He was part of a group of five tourists who visited the northeastern North Korean city of Rajin in November and has been held since then.

Some media reports have identified Bae as the leader of the tour group and NK News, a specialist North Korea news website, said he was the owner of a company called Nation Tours that

specialized in tours of north-east North Korea.

The reports could not be verified and North Korean state news agency KCNA did not list any specific charge other than crimes against the state, and used a Korean rendering of Bae's name, Pae Jun-ho, when it reported the Supreme Court ruling.

"North Korea has shown their intention to use him as a negotiating card as they have done in the past," said Cheong Seong-chang, senior fellow at the Sejong Institute, a Seoul-based think-tank.

Bae's sentence was heftier than the 12 years handed down to two U.S. journalists, Laura Ling and Euna Lee, in 2009. It took a visit to Pyongyang by former President Bill Clinton to secure their release.

North Korea appears to use the release of high profile American prisoners to extract a form of personal tribute, rather than for economic or diplomatic gain, often portraying visiting dignitaries as paying homage.

According to North Korean law, the punishment for hostile acts against the state is between five and 10 years hard labor.

"I think his sentencing was hefty. North Korea seemed to consider his acts more severe," said Jang Myung-bong, honorary professor at Kookmin University in Seoul and a North Korea law expert.

North Korea is one of the most isolated states on earth. Its official policy of "Juche" or self-reliance is a fusion of Marxism, extreme nationalism and self sufficiency centered on the cult of the ruling Kim family.

Separate Jail

Bae will not, however, be incarcerated in one of the North's notorious slave labor camps, such as the one where defector Kwon Hyo-jin was locked up. There, Kwon said, prisoners were

worked to death and often survived only by eating rats and snakes.

“If an American served jail together with North Korean inmates, which won’t happen, he could tell them about capitalism or economic developments. That would be the biggest mistake for North Korea,” said Kwon, a North Korean sentenced to one of its camps for seven years until 2007. He defected to South Korea in 2009.

“(Bae) would be sent to a correctional facility that only houses foreigners and was set up as a model for international human rights groups,”

It was not known if Bae had been taken immediately to jail.

Ling, the journalist, told U.S. television that she was placed in a 5-by-6 foot cell when captured and then kept in a regular room afterwards.

Bae was given counsel by the Swedish Embassy in Pyongyang, which has consistently declined to comment on the case, as the United States does not have diplomatic relations with the North.

Additional reporting by Christine Kim; Editing by David Chance and Raju Gopalakrishnan

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