

North Korea Sentences US Citizen to 6 Years Hard Labor

North Korea sentenced U.S. citizen Matthew Todd Miller to six years hard labor for committing “hostile acts” as a tourist to the country, a statement carried by state media said on Sunday, as the United States requested his immediate pardon and release.

Miller joins Kenneth Bae to become the second American currently serving a hard-labor sentence in North Korea. A third, Jeffrey Fowle, is awaiting trial.

“He committed acts hostile to the DPRK while entering the territory of the DPRK under the guise of a tourist last April,” the short statement said. The Korean version of the statement described Miller’s punishment as a “labor re-education” sentence.

Miller, from Bakersfield, California, and in his mid-20s, entered North Korea in April this year whereupon he tore up his tourist visa and demanded Pyongyang grant him asylum, according to a release from state media at the time. He was traveling without foreign guides, according to Uri Tours, the company that organized the trip.

North Korea has not publicly elaborated on Miller’s charges, but the Associated Press, which was able to attend the trial, said Miller was tried under Article 64 of the North Korean criminal code which refers to espionage.

Photos of the trial released by state media showed some of Miller’s personal possessions, including his passport, iPhone, iPad, notebook and North Korean visa – which appeared to be ripped. Miller was shown sitting in a witness box, flanked by North Korean soldiers.

The prosecution argued Miller's reported claims for asylum had been a "ruse", and that he had falsely claimed to have secret information on his iPad and iPhone about the U.S. military stationed in South Korea, the Associated Press said.

The court said Miller had torn up his visa in order to investigate the North Korean human rights situation from within a North Korean prison, according to the Associated Press.

In Washington, State Department spokesman Darby Holladay said the United States requests that North Korea pardon both Miller and Bae "and grant them amnesty and immediate release so they may reunite with their families."

In a statement, Holladay said the State Department "strongly recommends against all travel by U.S. citizens to North Korea."

North Korea has yet to announce a trial date for the third U.S. citizen, Jeffrey Fowle, 56, from Miamisburg, Ohio, who was arrested in May for leaving a Bible under a bin in the toilet of a sailor's club in the eastern port city of Chongjin.

Holladay added that "out of humanitarian concern for Jeffrey Fowle and his family" the United States also asks that North Korea grant him amnesty and immediate release.

The U.S. missionary Bae has been held since December 2012 and is serving a sentence of 15 years hard labor for crimes North Korea said amounted to a plot to overthrow the state.

Earlier this month, international media were granted rare access to the three detained Americans, who in separate interviews all called on the United States to secure their release.

'Citizens as Pawns'

North Korea, which is under heavy United Nations sanctions related to its nuclear and missile programs, is believed to be using the detained U.S. citizens to extract a high-profile visit from Washington, with whom it has no formal diplomatic ties.

Assistant Secretary of State Daniel Russel, the senior U.S. diplomat for East Asia, said on Friday that the three Americans were being used as “pawns” and their detention was “objectionable.”

Pyongyang has in the past released detained U.S. citizens to delegations led by former U.S. Presidents Bill Clinton and Jimmy Carter, but North Korea has twice canceled visits by Robert King, the U.S. special envoy for North Korean human rights issues, to discuss Kenneth Bae’s case.

Tourism to North Korea has increased markedly in the past few years, despite the recent string of arrests, with some operators estimating a tenfold increase in Western visitors over the last ten years.

“Although we ask a series of tailored questions on our application form ... it’s not always possible for us to foresee how a tourist may behave during a DPRK tour,” said Andrea Lee, CEO of Uri Tours, the company that organized Miller’s tour to the country, also known by its official ‘DPRK’ acronym.

“Unfortunately, there was nothing specific in Mr. Miller’s tour application that would have helped us anticipate this unfortunate outcome,” Lee said in an emailed statement.

North Korea on Saturday released a 50,000-word report on its human rights record in rebuttal to a United Nations report earlier this year that said the country’s leadership should be tried for ordering the systematic torture, starvation and killing of its people.

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