

U.S. sends envoy to N. Korea to seek release of jailed American

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USPA News - The U.S. government will send a senior official to North Korea this week to seek the release of a Korean American man who was sentenced to 15 years of hard labor after being convicted of plotting to overthrow the North Korean government, officials said on late Tuesday. Pae Jun Ho, who is better known by his American name Kenneth Bae, was sentenced in April to 15 years of hard labor after being found guilty of committing hostile acts aimed at toppling the North Korean government.

His family denied the allegations, describing him as a tour operator and Christian missionary. The U.S. State Department said Robert King, its special envoy for North Korean Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues, will travel to Pyongyang on Friday on a humanitarian mission focused on securing the release of Bae. The department said the visit is in response to an invitation from the North Korean government, but gave no other details about the invitation. "King will be adding a stop in North Korea to his current travels in the region," White House Press Secretary Jay Carney said. "We remain deeply concerned about the health and welfare of Kenneth Bae. We urge the government of North Korea to grant special clemency to Mr. Bae immediately and allow him to return home with Ambassador King." Bae was arrested in November 2012 after he traveled from China to the North Korean special economic zone of Rason with a group of businessmen, but the exact purpose of his visit remains unclear. The state-run Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) previously said the 'hostile acts' allegedly committed by Bae had been proven in court with evidence, but gave no other details. Myung Hee, Bae's mother, criticized the U.S. government last month for not making enough efforts to help free her 44-year-old son, who has now been detained longer than any previous American prisoner in North Korea. His sister Terri Chung disputed the charges Bae was convicted of, but acknowledged the North Koreans may have considered his religious convictions to be threatening. "All I know is that my brother is a good man. He's an idealist, and a man of strong convictions, and he may have been maybe a little overzealous, and maybe made some wrong choices," Chung told CBS News, just weeks after the family had received handwritten letters from Bae in which he begged for their help and said he was going blind, with his health failing due to diabetes and a heart condition. Myung, who has a weekly call with the U.S. State Department, said she believed the U.S. government was not doing enough to get her son released. "I don't see any action," she told CBS News at the time. "I want to ask them, send an envoy or do something. As a mother, I am really getting angry. Really getting angry. What do they do?" Former New Mexico Governor Bill Richardson, who previously visited North Korea and played a role in getting jailed Americans back home, told the news network last month that he had met with the North Korean ambassador at the United Nations (UN) but indicated it would likely take 'out-of-the-box diplomacy' to secure Bae's release. "[The Ambassador's] message was pretty harsh, it was not good," Richardson said. "It was: Kenneth Bae's there for a while, no high-profile rescue this time. We're not going to go easy on this. He committed a crime. We have no relationship, no dialogue, so that's the way it's going to be." North Korea and the United States have no diplomatic relations, but Sweden acts as a protecting power. The U.S. State Department previously said officials from the Swedish Embassy in Pyongyang had visited Bae several times, but they did not attend the sentencing in April.

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