Beat: Politics

N. Korea rescinds invitation for US. envoy to seek release of jailed American

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USPA News - North Korea has again rescinded an invitation for U.S. Ambassador Robert King to visit the country to seek the release of imprisoned U.S. missionary Kenneth Bae, who was sentenced to 15 years of hard labor, U.S. officials said on Monday. The state-run Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) did not report on the latest developments, but noted in a one-sentence bulletin that retired U.S. diplomat Donald Gregg had arrived in the capital Pyongyang.

It provided no details about the purpose of Gregg?s visit. Hours earlier, the U.S. State Department said it was ?deeply disappointed? after being informed that North Korea had decided to rescind its invitation for Robert King, the special U.S. envoy for North Korean Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues, to travel to Pyongyang to discuss Kenneth Bae?s release. ?The DPRK announced publicly in May 2013 it would not use the fate of Kenneth Bae as a political bargaining chip,? the U.S. official said, referring to North Korea by its official name, the Democratic People?s Republic of Korea. Others around the world remain concerned for Kenneth Bae and have repeatedly called for his release. One of these people, Reverend Jesse Jackson, has agreed to undertake a humanitarian mission for Bae?s release, his family said on Monday. ?My mother and I had the opportunity to meet with Rev. Jackson and have been touched by his warmth, generosity of spirit, and his investment in bringing Kenneth home. Regardless of the outcome, we are deeply grateful to Rev. Jackson for his proactive pursuits of Kenneth?s freedom,? said Terri Chung, Kenneth Bae?s sister. The U.S. official also made reference to upcoming military exercises between the U.S. and South Korea, which led to North Korea calling off its first meeting with King in September 2013. ?We remind the DPRK that the US-ROK military exercises are transparent, regularly scheduled and defense-oriented. These exercises are in no way linked to Mr Bae?s case,? the official said, calling on North Korea to grant Bae special amnesty and immediate release. Kenneth 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. He was sentenced in April 2013 to 15 years of hard labor after being found guilty of committing hostile acts aimed at toppling the North Korean government. The family of the jailed American has denied the allegations, describing Bae as a tour operator and Christian missionary. But the state-run KCNA news agency said the `hostile acts` allegedly committed by Bae had been proven in court with evidence, although it has provided no information to support this. Last month, Bae, who is also known as Pae Jun Ho, appeared at what experts described as an almost certainly staged press conference during which he ?admitted? his crimes. He also accused the media of staging a ?smear campaign? against North Korea over human rights violations, which he said made it difficult for him to receive a pardon. After the press conference, which took place at Pyongyang?s Friendship Hospita, where he had been receiving treatment for chronic health problems, Bae was transported back to labor camp. ?We are distressed to learn that Kenneth was sent back to the labor camp on Jan. 20, which gives our family renewed urgency to bring him home,? his sister said on Monday. Terri Chung added: ?Kenneth suffers from chronic medical conditions that require treatment, including severe back pain. We remain gravely concerned that the stress Kennth endures at the labor camp will be too much for him. We do not know whether his body will be able to withstand the strains of hard labor, eight hours a day, six days a week. Responding to last month?s press conference, U.S. State Department spokeswoman Jen Psaki said the U.S. government is working closely with the Swedish embassy in Pyongyang to secure Bae?s release. ?As we have said before, we remain very concerned about Kenneth Bae?s health. We continue to urge the DPRK authorities to grant Bae amnesty and immediate release,? she said. Former New Mexico Governor Bill Richardson, who previously visited North Korea and played a role in getting jailed Americans back home, told CBS News in July 2013 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 last year. Monday marked the 474th day of Kenneth Bae?s detainment, longer than any previous American prisoner in North Korea.

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