

North Korea sentences American prisoner, pushes for talks with US

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A North Korean court on September 14 handed down a six-year sentence of hard labor to an American citizen who was arrested shortly after entering the country in April. Matthew Miller is one of three Americans currently being held, each accused of committing acts hostile to the state.

Another American, Kenneth Bae, who was arrested in December 2012, has already been given a 15-year sentence, while Jeffrey Fowle awaits trial. The three are being used by Pyongyang as bargaining chips in its dealings with the United States.

At the beginning of this month, all three were trotted out before CNN cameras prior to Miller's trial, in order to plead with Washington to intervene on their behalf and secure their release. The news network conducted five-minute interviews with each American at a hotel in Pyongyang.

US State Department spokesman Darby Holladay demanded the release of the three, claiming that the charges against them would not result in arrest or imprisonment in the US or many other countries.

In reality, the Obama administration has little concern for the fates of the three men. It is continuing to demonize North Korea in order to help justify the US military buildup in the Asia-Pacific region. The arrest of the Americans plays into Washington's hands in demonstrating the supposed threat of the North.

Washington can also use the arrests to pressure Pyongyang on issues related to China. The US has in the past held up Burma as an example for North Korea to follow. In other words, if Pyongyang were to begin distancing itself from Beijing as the Burmese regime did in 2011, today's repressive regime could easily become the world's next "emerging democracy."

Miller, 24, landed in Pyongyang on April 10 with the travel group, Uri Tours. Upon arriving he tore up his

visa and requested asylum, according to regime officials. Miller was convicted by the country's Supreme Court for committing "acts hostile to the DPRK [Democratic People's Republic of Korea] while entering ... under the guise of a tourist," according to the North's official Korean Central News Agency.

Bae, a Christian missionary was arrested in November 2012. Originally from South Korea, he conducted tours in the North, based out of China. Bae, who is reportedly in poor health, was detained ostensibly for using his trips to preach Christianity.

Fowle was also arrested in May for a religious-based crime, supposedly for leaving behind a bilingual English-Korean Bible at a club for foreign sailors. Like Miller, Fowle entered the country as part of a tour group.

Pyongyang is hoping the three detentions will lead to high-level talks with Washington. Pyongyang rejected a US proposal to send Robert King, a special representative on North Korean human rights issues, to secure the prisoners' release. North Korea has rejected talks altogether until a suitable envoy is proposed.

Pyongyang may be holding out for a former president, something directly suggested by Fowle in his CNN interview, during which he said Bill Clinton or George W. Bush would be acceptable. In 2009, Clinton went to Pyongyang to bring back two jailed journalists, while Jimmy Carter ventured to North Korea the following year to secure the release of Aijalon Gomes, a missionary.

Washington's hardline stance toward North Korea is part of its "pivot to Asia." The purpose of the "pivot" is to surround and isolate China, both economically and militarily. By targeting North Korea, the US has a pretext for its military "rebalance" to the region, including the deployment of 60 percent of its navy and

air force in the Asia Pacific by 2020, and the installation of anti-ballistic missile systems, designed to try to ensure its dominance of any nuclear war with China. South Korea has agreed to US demands to host a THAAD anti-missile system, raising concerns in Beijing.

The Obama administration would undoubtedly require North Korea to jump through a series of hoops, even to begin initiating talks with the US. Washington has set the dismantling of the North's nuclear weapons program as the prerequisite for resuming six-party negotiations between the US, North and South Korea, China, Russia and Japan on Pyongyang's nuclear facilities.

Pyongyang has stated its readiness to return to the talks, but without conditions. It is unwilling to surrender its nuclear bargaining chip unless crippling US economic sanctions are lifted in return.

China has also called for a return to the talks without set conditions. Beijing is growing increasingly concerned over North Korea's political stability and the possibility that conditions there will be exploited by the US.

For all its blustering and bombastic talk, the North Korean regime has no interest in a genuine confrontation with the US or South Korea. It is attempting to attract foreign investment to 14 special economic zones, announced last year. However, without approval from Washington, investment will not flow any time soon—hence Pyongyang's desire to strike a deal.

Lately, on top of its usual bellicose rhetoric and short-range rocket tests, North Korea has attempted a charm offensive. Pyongyang sent diplomat Kang Sok-ju to Europe to visit Germany, Belgium, Switzerland and Italy. Kang is North Korea's lead negotiator in nuclear diplomacy and was involved in striking a deal with the US in 1994. Premier Pak Pong-ju also stated during a ceremony marking the 66th anniversary of the founding of North Korea: "We will do our best to improve North-South relations."

The North struck a deal with Japan earlier this summer in which the regime agreed to initiate an investigation into missing and abducted Japanese citizens in return for a relaxation of sanctions. A preliminary report is expected soon, but Pyongyang is also pressing for aid to continue the search, reflecting

the regime's desperation.

North Korea will be the topic of a high-level side meeting during this week's UN General Assembly. Under the guise of human rights, the US will undoubtedly seek to rally support for its "pivot" and apply additional pressure on Pyongyang to comply with Washington's demands. North Korea's Foreign Minister Ri Su-yong will be in New York for the General Assembly meeting—the first time in 15 years an official of Ri's status will visit the UN.



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