

N. Korea says it called off meeting with Washington over U.S. 'provocation'

-, 01.09.2013, 21:22 Time

USPA News - North Korea said Sunday it rescinded its invitation for a senior American diplomat to visit the country to negotiate the release of an American detainee because the U.S. committed a "grave provocation" by allegedly using nuclear-capable bombers during recent drills. Robert King, the special U.S. envoy for North Korean Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues, had been scheduled to visit Pyongyang on Friday and Saturday after receiving an invitation from North Korea to discuss the case of Pae Jun Ho, who is better known by his American name Kenneth Bae, from a humanitarian viewpoint.

But the visit was called off just hours before Friday's visit, after which U.S. State Department spokeswoman Marie Harf expressed her 'surprise and disappointment' on behalf of the U.S. government. She did not say why North Korea rescinded its invitation, and said the U.S. had sought clarification from North Korea. But in a statement issued Sunday, North Korea's Foreign Ministry accused the U.S. government of "floating misinformation" by stating that the North had called off the meeting without any proper reason. "It is somewhat surprising that the U.S. is making irrelevant remarks that it was surprised by our action," a ministry spokesman said. The ministry said it had invited King to discuss Bae's case from a humanitarian viewpoint, but rescinded the invitation after Washington committed "a grave military provocation" by allegedly mobilizing nuclear-capable B-52H strategic bombers during recent military drills with South Korea. "The U.S. perpetrated such a grave military provocation as infiltrating B-52H strategic bombers into the sky above the Korean Peninsula in succession, an unprecedented act, for a drill for nuclear bombing, far from positively responding to our tolerance and patience," the North's spokesman said in his statement. He added: "As shown by the situation which reached the brink of a war in April, the strategic bombers' intrusion into the air over the Korean Peninsula is the most blatant nuclear blackmail against us and a military threat to us as it is the most striking manifestation of the offensive and aggressive nature of the joint military drills." "The U.S. thus beclouded the hard-won atmosphere of humanitarian dialogue in a moment," he continued. The ministry said it "clearly notified" the U.S. government about its position through the New York contact channel, and as such expressed surprise about Harf's statement which did not give a reason for the rescinded invitation. 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 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 have denied the allegations, describing Bae as a tour operator and Christian missionary. But the state-run Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) said the 'hostile acts' allegedly committed by Bae had been proven in court with evidence, although it gave no other details. Myung Hee, Bae's mother, criticized the U.S. government in July 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 in July 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.

Article online:

<https://www.uspa24.com/bericht-1403/n-korea-says-it-called-off-meeting-with-washington-over-us-provocation.html>

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