

Beat: Local

American jailed in N. Korea `admits crimes` at Pyongyang press conference

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USPA News - A Korean American man who was sentenced to 15 years of hard labor after being found guilty of plotting to overthrow the North Korean government appeared Monday at an almost certainly staged press conference in which he `admitted` his crimes. Pae Jun Ho, who is better known by his American name Kenneth Bae, addressed local and foreign reporters at Friendship Hospital in the capital Pyongyang to accuse the media of a `smear campaign` against North Korea over human rights violations.

He said the media reports have made it difficult for him to receive a pardon from the North Korean government. "Some media are spreading misinformation about me and launching a smear campaign against the DPRK, driving me into a difficult situation," Bae said, referring to North Korea by its official name. He said there is no truth to reports that the North Korean government has committed human rights abuses. "The DPRK government has done every possible thing for me from the humanitarian point of view," he said. "It allowed me contact with the Swedish embassy and have correspondence and calls with my family. It also gave me an opportunity to meet my mother here and offered me a medical service at the hospital when my disease got worse." 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 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 has provided no information to support this. "Some time ago even my sister reportedly told reporters that I am not guilty. I think such facts enraged people here," Bae said on Monday. Terri Chung, Kenneth Bae's sister, watched the press conference and said that while her brother appeared tired and in decent health, he was not his "usual cheerful self." Chung pleaded with North Korean authorities to release her brother, citing her deep concern for his chronic health problems. "Our family sincerely apologizes on Kenneth's behalf," she said. "Kenneth has also acknowledged his crimes and has apologized. My brother is not a number to me, or to the rest of his family. He is a kind and loving husband, father, son and brother - and needs to be home immediately." During Monday's press conference, Bae said he feared being sent back to labor camp as a result of the alleged smear campaign by the media. "Over the past five months I have been hospitalized, but now I am afraid I may be sent back to the labor camp. Worse still, I am afraid the pardon for me becomes more difficult," he told journalists. Experts believe the press conference was almost certainly staged, as the North Korean government has used similar tactics in the past. Bae's comments focused heavily on defending the North Korean government, saying they were right for detaining him and that he had not been mistreated. "To cite another example, I was told that some media reports alleged that the DPRK is a `human rights violator`, that its human rights records are not good and that I have been treated unfairly," Bae said. "What I would like to clarify here now is that there has been no human rights abuse and no unfair, severe act for me." He went on to call on his family, the media, and the U.S. government to stop making his situation worse by continuing the "smear campaign" against the North Korean government and spreading "false information" about him. "I hope that I will be pardoned by the DPRK and go back to my family. I request the U.S. government, media and my family to pay deep concern and make all efforts to this end," he added. Responding to Monday'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. Myung Hee, Bae's mother, criticized the U.S. government in July 2013 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 previously disputed the charges Bae was convicted of, but acknowledged the North Koreans may have considered his religious convictions to be threatening. 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.

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