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Who Are the Three US Citizens Released by North Korea?

Newsmax (14.05.2018) - <https://nws.mx/2wD9efg> - The three former prisoners are Korean-Americans who traveled to North Korea for humanitarian purposes.

North Korea released the men, who are coming home with Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, President Donald Trump said Wednesday.

Despite years of hostility between Washington and Pyongyang, hundreds of Americans visited North Korea every year until the U.S. State Department finally issued a travel ban on the country last September.

Americans made the journey to North Korea for a range of reasons, from holidays and business trips to humanitarian work and missionary purposes.

Seoul is also pushing for the release of six South Koreans held by Pyongyang including three defectors originally from North Korea, and three Christian missionaries -- the first of whom was detained in 2013.

Pompeo's visit to North Korea comes with Trump preparing for a historic summit with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un in the coming weeks, as a dramatic diplomatic thaw on the peninsula quickens.

These are the US citizens who were released:

Kim Hak-song had been working for the Pyongyang University of Science and Technology (PUST) undertaking agricultural development work with the school's farm.

He was arrested at Pyongyang railway station in May 2017 on suspicion of committing "hostile acts" against the government, as he was boarding a train headed for his home in Dandong, China.

Kim, who is in his mid-50s, was born in Jilin, China, and educated at a university in California, CNN reported, citing a man who had studied with him. He said Kim returned to China after about 10 years of living in the US.

PUST was founded by evangelical overseas Christians and opened in 2010. It is known to have a number of American faculty members and students are generally children from the North's elite.

Kim Sang-duk, or Tony Kim, was arrested in April 2017 at the capital's main airport as he tried to leave the country after teaching for several weeks, also at PUST.

Kim is a former professor at Yanbian University of Science and Technology in China, close to the Korean border. Its website lists his specialty as accounting.

South Korea's Yonhap news agency has reported Kim is in his late 50s and said he had been involved in relief activities for children in rural parts of North Korea. It cited a source who described him as a "religiously devoted man."

In a Facebook post, Kim's son said since his arrest his family has had no contact with him. His family said Kim will soon become a grandfather.

Kim Dong-chul, a South Korea-born American businessman and pastor who is in his 60s, was sentenced to 10 years' hard labor in April 2016 after being charged with subversion and espionage.

He was arrested in October 2015 after he reportedly received a USB stick containing nuclear-linked data and other military information from a former North Korean soldier.

In an interview with CNN in January 2016, Kim said he was a naturalized American who had lived in Fairfax, Virginia. He said he once ran a trading and hotel services company in Rason, a special economic zone near the North's border with China and Russia.

A month before his trial, Kim had also appeared at a government-arranged news conference and apologized for attempting to steal military secrets in collusion with South Korea. The South Korean spy agency has denied involvement.

US citizens set for release ahead of Trump-Kim talks

World Watch Monitor (03.05.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2rqnuSK> - Three American citizens detained in North Korea seem set to be released ahead of a meeting between the two countries' leaders next month.

The BBC reported that the three men had been "relocated to a Pyongyang hotel and are receiving good food and medical care".

US President Donald Trump tweeted yesterday (2 May) that the US "has long been asking for three hostages to be released from a North Korean Labor camp, but to no avail. Stay tuned!"



Who are the Americans?

Kim Dong-chul, a pastor in his early 60s, was arrested in 2015 and sentenced to 10 years' hard labour after admitting spying for South Korea, which Seoul denied.

Tony Kim (also known as Kim Sang-duk) was detained in April 2017 for “committing criminal acts of hostility” against the North Korean government. Kim, in his 50s, had been involved in humanitarian work with orphanages and taught at the Pyongyang University for Science and Technology (PUST), which trains the children of North Korea’s elite and has a volunteer staff that includes many evangelical Christians.

Kim Hak Song was arrested two weeks later, in May 2017, as he prepared to leave the country after working for several weeks as a lecturer at PUST. He was arrested on charges of “hostile acts” against the regime. Reuters reported that in 2015, he had posted a message on the website of a Korean-Brazilian church in Sao Paulo, saying “he was a Christian missionary planning to start an experimental farm at PUST and was trying to help the North Korean people learn to become self-sufficient”.

Others released

In August last year Hyeon Soo Lim, a Korean-Canadian church leader sentenced to life in prison with hard labour, was released “on sick bail”. Detained since February 2015, he was convicted later that year of numerous charges, including an attempt to overthrow the government.

His release came just a few months after 22-year-old American student Otto Warmbier died at home, just one week after his release from 15 months’ detention for stealing a small flag from his Pyongyang hotel. Warmbier had been sentenced to 15 years’ hard labour but was released having reportedly falling ill while in detention and was evacuated in a medically induced coma.

In 2014 two Americans were released following a personal note from then US President Barack Obama to Kim Jong-un at the beginning of Obama’s week-long tour of Asia.

But South Korean pastor Kim Jong-Wook, sentenced to a life of hard labour in 2014, is still being detained. As a missionary, Kim operated from the Chinese border city of Dandong, where he provided shelter, food and other aid to North Korean refugees who crossed the border seeking relief from the famine in their country.

North Korea is No. 1 on the 2018 Open Doors World Watch List of the 50 countries where it is most difficult to be a Christian.
