



Written by on August 5, 2009

## U.S. Journalists Come Home After N. Korean Pardon

Euna Lee and Laura Ling, the two American journalists arrested by North Korean border guards on March 17 after straying into North Korean territory from China, arrived by private jet at Burbank's Bob Hope Airport early on August 5, accompanied by former President Bill Clinton.



The pair had been sentenced by a North Korean court on June 8 to 12 years of "reform through labor" for an illegal border crossing and an unspecified "grave crime."

North Korean leader Kim Jong Il had issued a "special pardon" freeing the two American journalists after holding talks with former President Clinton, KCNA, Pyongyang's official Korean Central News Agency announced on August 5. The agency added that the pardon was a sign of North Korea's "humanitarian and peace-loving policy."

State media also reported that Clinton had apologized on behalf of the women and had conveyed President Barack Obama's gratitude for the pardon, and also stated that the visit would "contribute to deepening the understanding" between North Korea and the United States.

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton disputed the North Korean claim that her husband had delivered an apology about the border crossing to Kim. "That is not true," she said. "That did not occur."

However, when Secretary Clinton last month urged North Korea to grant the journalists amnesty, she said that they were "remorseful" and that their families were anguished by their imprisonment.

AP News observed that the release of the journalists amounted to a successful diplomatic foray for former President Clinton, who traveled as an unofficial envoy, with approval and coordination from the Obama administration. The report noted that Clinton was the only recent president who had considered visiting North Korea while in office, but the highest level visitor sent to the communist state had been Clinton's secretary of state, Madeleine Albright.

In answer to speculations about who had approached former President Clinton to make the visit and whether he had discussed other issues with Kim, a senior U.S. official said that the journalists' families and former Vice President Gore had asked the former president to journey to Pyongyang to seek their release, and that his mission did not include discussing any other matters.

The two women were on assignment for San Francisco-based Current TV, a media venture co-founded by Gore and attorney Joel Hyatt, the son-in-law of former U.S. Sen. Howard Metzenbaum. At the conclusion of our [April 2 report](#) on the plight of the two journalists, we posed the rhetorical question: "Will the United States stand by its citizen journalists, or abandon them to maintain its strong defense of enforcing UN Security Council Resolution 1718 [which imposed a series of economic and commercial



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sanctions on North Korea in the aftermath of Pyongyang's nuclear test of October 9, 2006]?"

To which we answered: "Normally, we would bet on our State Department to strongly back the UN and hand over the journalists as sacrificial lambs. However, this time, the two women may have one trump card that may save them: They work for Al Gore, who is certainly well connected with any Democratic administration."

After news of the journalists' release was announced, Gore said in a joint statement with Current co-founder Hyatt that everyone at the media company was overjoyed by their impending safe return. "Our hearts go out to them and to their families for persevering through this horrible experience," said the statement.

In response to the release of their daughters, the Lee and Ling families issued a personal message of thanks to President Obama, Secretary of State Clinton, former President Clinton, and former Vice President Gore. "We are so grateful to our government, President Obama, Secretary Clinton, and the U.S. State Department for their dedication to and hard work on behalf of American citizens," said their statement. "We especially want to thank President Bill Clinton for taking on such an arduous mission and Vice President Al Gore for his tireless efforts to bring Laura and Euna home. We are counting the seconds to hold Laura and Euna in our arms."

While no one can discount the efforts of former President Clinton in bringing an end to the anguish experienced by the two journalists and their families anxiously awaiting the outcome of their ordeal, those familiar with the intrigue that often drives U.S. foreign policy cannot naïvely assume that all official efforts to secure the release of the two young women were motivated by strictly humanitarian concerns. An opinion piece in the *Wall Street Journal* for August 4, "[Paying Kim's Price](#)," (subheaded: "Was Mr. Clinton's visit the down payment for a larger set of American concessions?") raises some very legitimate reservations about this incident.

The first point raised was that the repressive — yet diplomatically experienced — regime of Kim Jong Il had learned to outmaneuver the United States in the international poker match between the two nations. It observed:

The last time an American civilian was held prisoner by North Korea, in 1996, it took a visit from then-Congressman Bill Richardson to secure his release. Yesterday, it required the full prestige of a former U.S. President to win the freedom of captive journalists Euna Lee and Laura Ling. When it comes to giving up politically valuable hostages, the Dear Leader has clearly raised the price.

The author also thought it was significant that Mr. Clinton was met at the airport by Kim Kye-gwan, North Korea's top nuclear negotiator, and speculated that "North Korea may have had its own propaganda reasons for putting its diplomat in the photo-op."

Finally, the writer seemed skeptical about our government's claims that Clinton did not discuss issues other than the journalists' release while in Pyongyang, noting:

If it turns out that if a new nuclear negotiation really was begun during Mr. Clinton's visit, it will also send the signal to North Korea that the worse its behavior, the more it stands to gain from the U.S. And it will mean that Kim's price will be even higher to spring the next American hostages.

In our April 2 report, we speculated as to whether our government would place a higher priority on securing the release of the hostages or standing firm on backing UN sanctions against North Korea. If



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the *Journal's* editorial has come anywhere near identifying the reality of the situation, the question may have been moot. Because in the past, our government has typically accommodated communist regimes readily enough, hostages or no hostages. Just look at China.

*Photo: AP Images*



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