Beat: Politics

U.S. urges N. Korea to free American jailed for 15 years

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USPA News - The U.S. government on Thursday called on North Korea to grant amnesty and release immediately a Korean American man who has been sentenced to 15 years of hard labor after being found guilty of plotting to overthrow the North Korean government. U.S. State Department spokesman Patrick Ventrell said the exact circumstances of the case remain unclear but expressed concern about the "lack of transparency and due process" in North Korea`s legal system.

He made the comments hours after North Korea confirmed that Pae Jun Ho, who is better known by his American name Kenneth Bae, had been sentenced to 15 years of hard labor. "There is no greater priority for us than the welfare and safety of U.S. citizens abroad, and we urge the DPRK authorities to grant Mr. Bae amnesty and immediate release," Ventrell said in Washington, referring to North Korea by its official name, the Democratic People`s Republic of Korea. 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, but the exact purpose of his visit is unclear. A brief dispatch from the state-run Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) last month said Bae had admitted that he committed crimes aimed at toppling the North Korean government. The news agency said the unspecified crimes have been proven with evidence, but gave no other details. A bulletin on Saturday said Bae would be taken to the Supreme Court, where he stood trial on Tuesday and was sentenced to 15 years of hard labor, but not a death sentence as had been feared. "We don`t know the facts of the case. The Swedish are our protecting power and have had, in a few opportunities, the chance to meet with Mr. Bae, but there hasn`t been transparency in the case," Ventrell said. "So while some of the facts are limited to our knowledge - we don`t know all of the facts - we are concerned that, broadly speaking, about the transparency and due process in North Korea, and we think he should be released." North Korea and the United States have no diplomatic relations, but Sweden acts as a protecting power. Ventrell said officials from the Swedish Embassy in Pyongyang last visited Bae on April 26, but they did not attend Tuesday`s sentencing. It is not known whether the Swedish officials chose not to attend the sentencing or were prevented from doing so.

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