

North Korea Detains 85 Year Old U.S. War Veteran

News

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SEOUL, South Korea (AP) -- North Korean officials detained an 85-year-old American veteran of the Korean War last month as he sat in a plane set to leave the country, the man's son said.



A uniformed North Korean officer boarded the plane on Oct. 26 and asked Merrill Newman, a tourist from Palo Alto, California, for his passport before telling a stewardess that Newman had to leave the plane, the son, Jeffrey Newman, said Wednesday.

"My dad got off, walked out with the stewardess, and that's the last he was seen," Jeffrey Newman told The Associated Press at his home in Pasadena, California.

It wasn't clear what led to the detention. The son said he was speaking regularly with the U.S. State Department about his father, but U.S. officials wouldn't confirm the detention to reporters, citing privacy issues. North Korea's official state-run media have yet to comment on reports of the detention, which first appeared in the San Jose Mercury News and Japan's Kyodo News service.

The son said that, according to his father's traveling companion, Newman earlier had a "difficult" discussion with North Korean officials about his experiences during the 1950-53 war between U.S.-led United Nations forces and North Korea and ally China. That war ended in an armistice, not a peace treaty, leaving the Korean Peninsula still technically at war. The war is still an important part of North Korean propaganda, which regularly accuses Washington and Seoul of trying to bring down its political system - statements analysts believe are aimed in part at shoring up domestic support for young leader Kim Jong Un.

The detention comes about a year after North Korea detained another American and as the U.S. State Department warns in a formal notice that Americans should avoid travel to the country, in part because of the risk of arbitrary arrest and detention.

North Korea has detained at least six Americans since 2009, often for alleged missionary work, but it is unusual for a tourist to be arrested. The North's secretive, authoritarian government is sensitive about foreign travelers, and tourists are closely monitored. Analysts say it has used detained Americans as diplomatic pawns in a long-running standoff with the United States over the North's nuclear bomb production, something it denies.

Speaking Thursday to reporters in Beijing, U.S. Special Representative for North Korea Policy Glyn Davies wouldn't confirm Newman's detention but said, generally, that Washington was working with the Swedish Embassy in Pyongyang, which acts as America's protecting power because Washington and Pyongyang don't have official diplomatic relations, "to try to move this issue along and of course calling on North Korea ... to resolve the issue and to allow our citizens to go free."

Merrill Newman was traveling with his friend, Bob Hamrdla, who was allowed to return. Hamrdla said in a statement that "there has to be a terrible misunderstanding" and asked for Newman to be quickly returned to his family.

Jeffrey Newman said his father always wanted to visit North Korea and took lessons in the language before leaving on the nine-day trip. Newman said he believed the inspiration came from the three

years his father spent as an infantry officer in the Korean War, but said his father never talked about his service.

Jeffrey Newman said the Swedish ambassador had delivered his father's heart medication to the North Korean Foreign Affairs Ministry, but it was unclear whether he had received it.

Despite some recent nuclear diplomacy, tensions remain on the Korean Peninsula after a spring that saw threats from North Korea of nuclear strikes against Washington and Seoul. International disarmament talks are currently deadlocked, with North Korea demanding status as an atomic power and Washington refusing to resume the talks until the North makes progress on past disarmament commitments. The North is estimated to have a handful of crude nuclear devices and has conducted three underground atomic tests.

Davies, the U.S. envoy, told reporters that the holding of American citizens by North Korea is a further indication of its lack of sincerity on restarting a dialogue on nuclear issues.

Washington also has expressed worry about the health of American Kenneth Bae, a missionary and tour operator who was sentenced to 15 years of hard labor after being arrested in North Korea last November for alleged hostile acts.

Jeffrey Newman said he believed North Korea would eventually release his father after realizing that all they have is an "elderly traveler, a grandfather with a heart condition."

"We don't know what this misunderstanding is all about," he said. "All we want as a family is to have my father, my kids' grandfather, returned to California so he can be with his family for Thanksgiving."