Beat: Sports

Ex-NBA star Rodman arrives in N. Korea to meet "friend" Kim Jong-un

-, 03.09.2013, 17:52 Time

USPA News - Former U.S. basketball superstar Dennis Rodman arrived in North Korea on Tuesday to meet his "friend" Kim Jong-un for a second time, but he indicated he had no plans to negotiate the release of a Korean American man jailed for plotting to overthrow the North Korean government. Rodman, who is nicknamed "The Worm" and was known for his fierce defensive and rebounding abilities during his basketball career, arrived Tuesday at Pyongyang Sunan International Airport in the North Korean capital.

He, along with his delegation, was greeted by a North Korean vice sports minister. But Rodman and North Korean officials played down hopes that the basketball superstar would use the visit to negotiate the release of jailed Korean American Pae Jun Ho, who is better known by his American name Kenneth Bae. The visit comes just days after a senior American diplomat was to visit Pyongyang to discuss the case, but the North rescinded its invitation at the last moment. "I`m just going over there and meet my friend Kim, the marshal, and try to start a new basketball league over there, and stuff like that," Rodman told reporters in the Chinese capital of Beijing before boarding a flight to Pyongyang, according to the Kyodo news agency. He said he hoped to meet Kim, an avid basketball fan, either later on Tuesday or on Wednesday. After his arrival in Pyongyang, Rodman told reporters at the airport that he was "happy to come back here, to meet my friend," according to China`s state-run Xinhua news agency. The retired NBA star was said to be wearing dark sunglasses, a cap and a t-shirt emblazoned with his name and likeness. A source at North Korea`s Sports Ministry told Xinhua that Rodman`s visit "has nothing to do" with the case of Bae, as preparations for this week`s trip began as early as late July. The source said the delegation is scheduled to give a basketball clinic, watch a Taekwondo performance, watch a women`s football match, and travel to Mt. Kumgang during their four to five day stay. Rodman first visited North Korea in late February, when tensions soared in the wake of the North`s third nuclear test and Pyongyang`s hostile response to new international sanctions and joint South Korea-U.S. military drills. He attended an exhibition basketball match with Kim and called the North Korean leader "an awesome guy" and his "friend," raising eyebrows in the United States and elsewhere. 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 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 gave no other details. Robert King, the special U.S. envoy for North Korean Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues, had been scheduled to visit Pyongyang on Friday and Saturday after receiving an invitation from North Korea to discuss Bae`s case from a humanitarian viewpoint. The North rescinded its invitation after accusing Washington of committing a "grave provocation" by allegedly using nuclear-capable bombers during recent drills with South Korea. In July, Bae`s mother Myung Hee criticized the U.S. government 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 disputed the charges Bae was convicted of, but acknowledged the North Koreans may have considered his religious beliefs to be threatening. "All I know is that my brother is a good man. He`s an idealist, and a man of strong convictions, and he may have been maybe a little overzealous, and maybe made some wrong choices," Chung told CBS News, just weeks after the family had received handwritten letters from Bae in which he begged for their help and said he was going blind, with his health failing due to diabetes and a heart condition. Myung, who has a weekly call with the U.S. State Department, said she believed the U.S. government was not doing enough to get her son released. "I don`t see any action," she told CBS News in July. "I want to ask them, send an envoy or do something. As a mother, I am really getting angry. Really getting angry. What do they do?" Former New Mexico Governor Bill Richardson, who previously visited North Korea and played a role in getting jailed Americans back home, told the news network in July 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.

Article online:
https://www.uspa24.com/bericht-1417/ex-nba-star-rodman-arrives-in-n-korea-to-meet-friend-kim-jong-un.html

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UPA United Press Agency LTD
483 Green Lanes
UK, London N13NV 4BS
contact (at) unitedpressagency.com
Official Federal Reg. No. 7442619