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Trip to North Korea, August 24-27, 2010

On July 21 I was informed that North Korea wanted me and my wife to come to Pyongyang and secure the release of Aijalon Gomes, who had been arrested in January for entering the country illegally. He had been tried and sentenced to eight years of hard labor and fined about US\$700,000. Gomes was transferred to a hospital on July 4 and was being given intensive medical care. They made it clear that I was the only one whose request for Gomes's release would be honored, and stated that I would be meeting with Chairman Kim Jong Il and other leaders in hope of resurrecting the U.S.-DPRK agreements on denuclearization and peace that were the last official act of President Kim Il Sung when Rosalynn and I were invited there in June, 1994. Apparently, the N. Koreans attach extraordinary importance to the legacy of their "Great Leader and President for all time."

After reconfirming these proposals with the North Koreans, I notified the White House, but the requested mission was not approved until Mid-August, when we were informed by N. Korea that, because of the delays, Gomes would be transferred from the hospital back to prison. I was told that Kim Jong Il would no longer be available. At that time our trip was approved, with the understanding that I would be acting in a personal and unofficial status, not representing or sponsored by our government, with minimal publicity for the trip. I accepted all these restraints with pleasure. In the meantime, an assessment team was sent from the State Department to ascertain the medical condition of the prisoner and to seek his freedom. Although I did not receive any briefing on U.S. Korean policy, The Carter Center has monitored developments in the region as thoroughly as possible, and I was familiar with most issues.

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Rosalynn was unable to make the delayed trip, but I was accompanied by Dr. John Hardman, CEO of The Carter Center, my son Jeffrey, who has made a special study of Korean peninsula issues, my assistant Nancy Koenigsmark, and John Moores, who provided the chartered plane that made the trip possible. On August 21, I notified Gomes's mother that we would be bringing her son home to Boston, and would call her from Anchorage, Alaska, to give her a more exact time for our arrival.

With intermediate stops in Alaska and Japan, we then flew directly to Pyongyang. On the way I prepared a hand-written note expressing regret that Mr. Gomes had violated the laws of N. Korea and requesting that he be pardoned for humanitarian reasons.

I was met by Vice Foreign Minister Kim Kye Kwan, who had participated in my previous negotiations with Kim Il Sung in 1994 and has been the chief negotiator for N. Korea in the 6-power talks. He understood that I had no official status and would never speak on behalf of the U.S. government. We then went to meet with Kim Yong Nam, who is President of the Supreme People's Assembly Presidium and titular head of state - whom I also knew from my earlier visit. He was clearly in charge. After receiving my written request for the pardon of Gomes, President Kim emphasized the seriousness of three recent American violations of N. Korean sovereignty (including two women journalists) and said it would be at least 24 hours before a final decision could be made. In the meantime, he wanted to explore with me the possibilities and procedures that might be followed to honor the final commitments of Kim Il Sung, the subsequent N. Korea-USA framework agreement adopted by the Clinton administration, and to implement fully the comprehensive agreements made in 6-power talks in September 2005. (He referred to the talks as "sentenced to death but not yet executed.")

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He and I then spent about four hours in discussion of the key issues, with him giving me a broad outline of N. Korean proposals on how the existing impasse might be resolved. He requested that I meet with Kim Kye Kwan the next morning to go into specifics.

After almost 20 hours of travel and the long discussions, we enjoyed some rest in the lovely guest house, and then continued the next morning our more detailed talks about denuclearization, U.N. sanctions, peace agreements, trade and commerce. After lunch I concluded my discussions, this time with Foreign Minister Pak Ui-chun, and was then permitted to visit Mr. Gomes. There followed an elaborate ceremony, involving top officials from the army, the National Defense Commission (chaired by Kim Jong Il), and the Justice Department. Gomes publicly confessed his crime and read a beautiful letter of apology to the people of North Korea and thanked them for his good treatment. After a brief consultation, the officials gave final approval to his pardon, but said he would have to stay in the hospital until the next morning, at which time he would be delivered to us for his journey home.

That night we attended a remarkable concert by the National Symphony Orchestra, which had played host to the New York Symphony Orchestra during its visit to Pyongyang in 2008. The orchestra leaders and all political officials emphasized the importance of a return visit by their National Symphony to the United States. This seems to be very important to them.

The next morning Dr. Hardman picked up Aijalon Gomes at the hospital and they met us at the airport for our flight home. At the time of our departure, a brief press statement was released from The Carter Center in Atlanta.

From Anchorage, I called Gomes's mother, Mrs. Jackie McCarthy, and she and Aijalon enjoyed a long conversation before we departed for Boston. We were met there by about twenty members of the Gomes family, and there was an emotional reunion. After a photograph of us all together, we returned home to Plains.