

In surprise move, North Korea frees American detainees

By Associated Press, adapted by Newsela staff on 05.14.18

Word Count **870**

Level **1060L**



U.S. President Donald Trump (left) greets (from left) Tony Kim, Kim Hak Song (in shadow) and Kim Dong Chul, three Americans detained in North Korea for more than a year, as they arrive at Andrews Air Force Base in Maryland on May 10, 2018. Photo by: Susan Walsh/ AP Photo

PYONGYANG, North Korea — After months of anticipation and drama, three Americans who were being detained in North Korea were released on Wednesday, May 9. After some high-stakes diplomatic talks, the fate of the detainees was left up in the air. The deal was only sealed about one hour before Secretary of State Mike Pompeo flew out of Pyongyang.

The three men are Kim Dong Chul, Kim Hak Song and Tony Kim. They arrived in a van and walked onto Pompeo's plane. Pompeo is the top U.S. official in charge of diplomacy, or working with other countries. The men being freed ended Pompeo's half-day visit to the North Korean capital, which included a 90-minute meeting with the country's leader Kim Jong Un.

Amnesty Granted

Returning to his hotel from that meeting, Pompeo had given reporters a fingers-crossed sign when asked if there was good news about the detainees. A North Korean official came to the hotel shortly after to inform Pompeo that Kim had granted amnesties to the three. Amnesty is a type of official government forgiveness.

The men finally were freed at 7:45 p.m. on May 9. By 8:42 p.m. they were flying home.

As soon as the plane cleared North Korean airspace, Pompeo called President Donald Trump to inform him of the releases with the men all apparently in good health. Then other officials notified their families.

Trump immediately announced to the world by Twitter that the "three wonderful gentlemen" were free.

Deep Appreciation

In a statement, the former detainees expressed their "deep appreciation" to the U.S. government, Trump, Pompeo and the American people "for bringing us home."

They are the latest in a series of Americans to be held in North Korea for alleged anti-state activities in recent years. Saying something bad about the government can get a person jailed in North Korea. The Americans who get taken are eventually released. Normally this happens during the visit of a high-level U.S. official or statesman. Their releases draw attention to an important issue between the two countries. This is especially true now just before Kim and Trump plan to meet for a historic summit to discuss North Korea's nuclear weapons.

Difficult Decision To Release Detainees

A North Korean official said the releases would follow "a very brief ceremony." He said it was more of a legal process. With the good news also came a warning, though. "You should take care that they do not make the same mistakes again," the official said. He said it was a difficult decision to release the detainees.

The Trump administration has made clear it sees the arrests as politically motivated. It had also been bitterly critical of North Korea's refusal to grant anyone access to the three men. A U.S. diplomat was only allowed a brief visit last June. The same diplomat had brought back college student Otto Warmbier last year. He was sentenced to 15 years in prison with hard labor for stealing one of the government's propaganda posters. Warmbier died in June 2017, days after he arrived back in the United States with severe brain damage.

Since then, the U.S. government has been under a lot of pressure to bring back the three men.

Little Known About Three Men

Very little is known about the men, who are all Korean-American. Kim Dong Chul is a former Virginia resident who had reportedly run a company on North Korea's border with Russia. He had been punished with 10 years in prison with hard labor after being convicted of spying. Kim Hak Song and Tony Kim both taught at a university in Pyongyang that was founded with donations from Christian groups. They had been held for about one year and apparently had not been sent to court.

Tony Kim's son, Sol Kim, a graduate student in California, is the only relative of the detainees to have publicly begged for their freedom. After learning of the release, his family expressed gratitude and credited Trump for engaging directly with North Korea.

State of War Since 1950

North Korea and the U.S. have remained in a state of war since the 1950-1953 Korean War. The two countries do not have formal diplomatic ties. This complicates efforts to handle the cases of American detainees. Typically, Swedish diplomats based in North Korea handle U.S. diplomatic affairs.

Pompeo, the most senior U.S. official to meet with a North Korean leader since 2000, was making his second visit to the isolated nation in five weeks — and less than two weeks after becoming a top diplomat.

Pompeo said Wednesday he was "thrilled" the men were now out.

Not Back Home Yet, But Happy

"Though we're not quite back home yet, I welcomed them back," he said, recounting his first words with the men after they were freed. "They were happy to be with us on this plane to be sure," he said.

The three boarded when most of the U.S. delegation had already got on the plane. They were seated with medical personnel in a curtained-off area of the aircraft.

After arriving at a stop in Japan, the men transferred to another plane with more medical facilities and landed at Joint Base Andrews outside Washington on Thursday morning, where Trump greeted them.

Quiz

- 1 Which section highlights the idea that North Korea has a history of holding Americans as prisoners and then later releasing them?
- (A) "Amnesty Granted"
 - (B) "Deep Appreciation"
 - (C) "Difficult Decision To Release Detainees"
 - (D) "State Of War Since 1950"
- 2 What is the MAIN reason the author includes the section "Little Known About Three Men"?
- (A) to show how the begging of one son affected the release of his father by North Korea
 - (B) to show how Trump was able to solve the problem of the three mens' detainment by North Korea
 - (C) to explain what the three men were doing in North Korea when they were arrested
 - (D) to compare Christian groups in North Korea with other religious groups
- 3 How does the author introduce the idea that there was a lot of uncertainty about whether North Korea would release the three American prisoners?
- (A) by describing how Pompeo had a plane ready to fly the three Americans out of North Korea
 - (B) by explaining when the deal to get North Korea to release the three Americans was sealed
 - (C) by explaining that Pompeo spent a half day visiting the capital of North Korea
 - (D) by describing the responsibilities of the top U.S. official in charge of diplomacy

4 Read the statement below.

Many people believe that the three Americans did not deserve to be detained by North Korea.

Which sentence from the article BEST supports the statement?

- (A) A North Korean official came to the hotel shortly after to inform Pompeo that Kim had granted amnesties to the three.
- (B) He said it was a difficult decision to release the detainees.
- (C) The Trump administration has made clear it sees the arrests as politically motivated.
- (D) He had been punished with 10 years in prison with hard labor after being convicted of spying.