

Beat: News

N. Korea detains American tourist after tearing up visa at border

-, 26.04.2014, 04:32 Time

USPA News - A 24-year-old American citizen has been held in custody in North Korea for more than two weeks after he allegedly ripped up his tourist visa at immigration and demanded asylum from the reclusive country, the government confirmed on Friday. Matthew Todd Miller, 24, was arrested on April 10 for alleged "rash behavior" while going through formalities to enter North Korea to tour it, the state-run Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) said.

New Jersey-based travel agency Uri Tours confirmed Miller was a traveler on one of its private tours. "He had a tourist visa for the DPRK, but tore it to pieces and shouted hoarse that `he would seek asylum` and `he came to the DPRK after choosing it as a shelter.` This was a gross violation of its legal order," KCNA said in a brief news dispatch, referring to the country by its official name, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. KCNA said Miller was taken into custody after authorities took "a serious note of his behavior," but it was not immediately clear what charges he could face. U.S. State Department spokeswoman Jen Psaki said the government was aware of reports that an American citizen had been detained in North Korea and said it had been in contact with its protecting power in the country. "We have been in touch with the embassy of Sweden about these reports," she said, declining to comment further. Uri Tours, which never experienced such an incident in the more than 10 years it has been organizing tours to North Korea, said Miller was being held on claims of seeking asylum. "We have been working closely and continuously with all relevant government and diplomatic entities to resolve this matter in a speedy and favorable manner," the company said in a statement. "We are doing all we can to assist Mr. Miller through this process." Miller is now the second American who is being held in North Korea. U.S. missionary Kenneth 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 2013 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 Korean American has denied the allegations, describing Bae as a tour operator and Christian missionary. But the state-run KCNA news agency said the "hostile acts" allegedly committed by Bae had been proven in court with evidence, although it has provided no information to support the claims. North Korea and the United States have no diplomatic relations, but Sweden acts as a protecting power. The U.S. State Department also said Friday that officials from the Swedish Embassy in Pyongyang have visited Bae a total of 11 times since his arrest, most recently on April 18. Bae's family and American officials have repeatedly voiced concern over his chronic health problems and have called for his immediate release. In February, Australian tourist John Short, 75, was arrested in the North Korean capital of Pyongyang after spreading Bible tracts at a Buddhist temple on February 16, which is known in the country as the `Day of the Shining Star` and marks the birthday of former leader Kim Jong-il. On March 3, Short was released and expelled after apologizing in a confession that was published by state-run media.

Article online:

<https://www.uspa24.com/bericht-2141/n-korea-detains-american-tourist-after-tearing-up-visa-at-border.html>

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