

Media Roundtable at the U.S. Embassy

Share

Remarks

Robert R. King

Special Envoy for North Korean Human Rights Issues

Tokyo, Japan

June 8, 2012

AMBASSADOR KING: Thanks very much for taking the time to be here this afternoon. The purpose of the visit in Tokyo is to continue our conversations with the Japanese Government on human rights, humanitarian issues, and in particular the abductees. During the time that I've been here, I've had the opportunity of meeting with a number of members of the Diet; met with Mr. Matsubara, the Minister for Abductions; met with a number of other government officials. We'll be meeting with additional officials at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs this afternoon, and we'll also be meeting this afternoon with family members of the abductees. So it's been a useful and productive discussion for me to be able to be here, and if you have questions, I'll be happy to take them.

QUESTION: Martin Fackler with the *New York Times*. Welcome to Tokyo. My sense in looking at the abduction issue is that it doesn't get a high priority often, when the U.S. is making policy in North Korea. And I just wonder, has there been a shift, or if you could talk a bit about, for example, nonproliferation issues tend to take the higher priority, it seems. And I wonder, with what happened in February and the whole launch and that whole thing, if there's a change of thinking? I wonder if you could just tell us where the Administration stands at this time.

AMBASSADOR KING: North Korea is a complicated country, and the range of issues that we have to deal with with North Korea are fairly extensive. There obviously is the nuclear issue, and that's an issue that's important and significant to the United States and for other countries as well. But at the same time, the human rights concerns -- and the abduction issue in particular -- is another issue that's an important item on the agenda with North Korea. I think we try to give emphasis and effort to all of these issues. The reason my position was created by the Congress is to make sure that the human rights, the humanitarian issues, are given focus as well. And, as with any relationship, there are a lot of issues -- it's complex, and you try to factor in all of them as you are moving forward.

QUESTION: (Translated) Higashioka from Asahi Newspapers. Regarding the abduction issue, what kind of support is the U.S. Government thinking to provide to the Japanese Government? And your meeting with the family members of abductees? And an American called Sneddon, who went missing in Yunnan Province in China, people are speculating that maybe the person has been abducted by the North Koreans. So, what kind of approach is the U.S. going to take to rescue this individual? Thank you.

AMBASSADOR KING: First of all, with regard to what we're doing with the Japanese Government in terms of an effort to deal with the abductee issue, the primary focus and interest is obviously in

Japan since these are mostly Japanese citizens that we're dealing with here. What we have tried to do is work with the Japanese Government to reinforce, to assist them in what they're doing. We have made a point of raising the issue of the Japanese abductees when we've had an opportunity to raise those issues with North Korea. We've had a few opportunities, not many lately. But that's one of the things that we have tried to do. We've also emphasized in statements that we have made at the United Nations General Assembly in New York, at the Human Rights Council in Geneva, our support for Japan's effort to see the return of the abductees. So we continue to work with the Japanese; we share information; we try to reinforce what each other does in various forums; that we try to act. The second question that you raised was with regard to the American student David Sneddon who disappeared in southwest China. There have been suggestions that this may have been an abduction by the North Koreans. Thus far, we have not seen evidence that would directly indicate that. There may be some circumstantial evidence that would point in that direction. We haven't seen that information, but we continue to follow the issue. We continue to review the information. We meet periodically with the Chinese to update the information we have on this particular case with this particular American citizen. And so we're continuing to follow it very closely.

QUESTION: (Translated) Higashioka from Asahi Shimbun. With regard to Mr. Sneddon, the student, going forward you'll be keeping an eye on the developments. On the possibility of abduction: do you think the possibility exists? Or do you think it's not a possibility that he has been abducted.

AMBASSADOR KING: We don't have information - I haven't seen information that would lead me to draw a conclusion. So, I don't have any information that would lead me to any definitive conclusion.

QUESTION: The Republic of Korea has a much larger abduction issue than Japan. Do you link those two at all when you talk to North Koreans? I just wonder what the U.S. policy on that is. Because you don't hear so much about it, even though it involves a much larger number of people.

AMBASSADOR KING: Yeah. We're supportive of the South Korean abductees as well, and the South Koreans have a very large number of abductees, many of whom were abducted during the course of the Korean War. Again, we tend to be supportive of what the South Koreans are attempting to do in terms of the return of their citizens. But again, the North Koreans are not easy to deal with on issues like this. But the South Koreans have been raising the issue of abductions, and there are family organizations there similar to what's here in Japan.

QUESTION: Do you link them at all? I mean when you talk to the North Koreans, are those two issues brought up together, or are those seen as being separate issues?

AMBASSADOR KING: We haven't had a lot of conversations with the North Koreans on human rights. They're not particularly anxious to discuss human rights with us. When I was in Pyongyang a year ago, we had discussions. We had brief discussions in New York last summer as part of the larger nuclear discussions that were going on in that case. We have attempted and expressed our interest in beginning a dialogue on human rights with the North Koreans similar to what has taken place in the case of China for some time. So far, we haven't reached the point of being able to get into those kind of discussions, and so there isn't any effort to link or to rank or to order issues in terms of giving them priority. I wouldn't say that we link the Japanese abductions and the South Korean abductions. They're both similar issues. They're both humanitarian issues. We continue to press on both of those issues and urge that both of them be resolved.

QUESTION: At the risk of being tedious, one more question? Part of the package in February that was annulled by the rocket involved food aid, right? If my memory serves. Was there any discussion of food support for North Koreans?

AMBASSADOR KING: We have attempted to separate those issues. It's been difficult because the North Koreans have linked them. We were negotiating separately, but on somewhat of a parallel

timetable, in terms of providing humanitarian aid to the North Koreans. At the same time, discussions were taking place in other fora, a different forum on the nuclear issue. We reached a tentative agreement on providing food assistance. We reached a tentative agreement on monitoring the food assistance so we would be assured that it would reach those that it was intended to reach. When the North Koreans announced that they were launching a missile, we were concerned about what this said about North Korea's willingness to observe agreements that they had reached. And after the missile was fired, we made the determination that it was reasonable to believe that they would not follow the agreement that they reached, and so we've suspended the food aid. There was also concern that if there were Americans in North Korea involved in monitoring and management of the food assistance, of the humanitarian assistance, that there might be difficulties if the North Koreans engaged in provocations. So there were concerns about safety as well.

QUESTION: Akiko Fujita with ABC News. Building on that question, is the U.S. considering resuming food aid, and if so under what circumstances?

AMBASSADOR KING: At this point there is no indication the North Koreans – at least we haven't seen any solid indication yet – that the North Koreans are ready to re-engage. I think the speed with which they change their mind on the nuclear agreement raised questions about how willing they were to engage.

QUESTION: My name is Kazuo Sasa from NHK Japanese public TV station. I would like to ask a little bit broad question. How do you see the current situation with North Korea? I personally feel it is not a good situation at this moment, and what's needed to change the situation?

AMBASSADOR KING: North Korea is going through a leadership transition, and the question is how far have they succeeded in that leadership transition, and is it clear? We continue to watch very closely what goes on in North Korea, and we're beginning to form judgments, but at this point it's still a little early to tell exactly what the final form of the transition is.

QUESTION: Just one more question about the new leadership: you have been engaged in North Korean issues in the past few years, and when you met North Korean officials in February, did you notice any change after the new leadership?

AMBASSADOR KING: One of the things about North Korea is that the faces remain the same. And the same people that we have dealt with in the past are still the people we deal with. In fact, the North Koreans have had fairly long continuity in terms of the people that are dealing with foreign affairs, the Foreign Ministry. So at least on the level where we have talked to the North Koreans, when we last met with them, there were no changes.

QUESTION: Malcolm Foster with AP. On the abduction issue, what is it exactly that the U.S. is communicating to North Korea on this? What exactly are you wanting from North Korea, and what is North Korea's response to that?

AMBASSADOR KING: In terms of the primary expression of what the Japanese would like to see in terms of resolution of the abductees, the Japanese have expressed that and have voiced that to the North Koreans. When it involves the Japanese abductees, we would not want to put ourselves in a position of negotiating with North Korea on the release of abductees. What we have indicated to the North Koreans is our strong support for Japan and for the resolution of the abductees in a way that's favorable and that's acceptable to the Japanese.

QUESTION: And how has North Korea responded whenever you bring that up?

AMBASSADOR KING: I have not seen abductees returning to Japan, unfortunately.

QUESTION: (Translated) Higashioka from Asahi Newspapers. The Korean central KNCA is reporting about serious drought in North Korea, so what's the food situation like in North Korea recently? Do

they have enough food? And after Kim Jong-un taking the leadership, do you think the humanitarian situation or the human rights situation has improved in North Korea or not? What's your assessment? Thank you.

AMBASSADOR KING: I saw the KCNA reports on the drought in North Korea. I think those reports were about two weeks ago. I also saw weather reports that there was fairly heavy rain in Korea and in Japan last week, so I'm assuming that to some extent that's been somewhat mitigated. With regard to the food situation in North Korea, we don't have an overall assessment of the food situation. We have some anecdotal information periodically that we get. What we generally know from the assessments that have been done periodically over the last several years is that North Korea consistently does not produce enough food for its population and they are dependent on imports or on assistance, and I think that continues to be true. I think there's nothing to indicate that that's not true now. Average production in North Korea is probably 20% below what the needs of the population are, and North Korea fills those gaps with assistance that they're able to get and with help from other countries and occasionally with purchases of grain. So the food situation in North Korea I don't think is different this year. At least so I haven't seen anything to suggest it's any different this year than it's been in many of the years in the past.

QUESTION: Me and Higashioka-san - we're going to keep you busy. Is there a possibility of food aid? I'm just curious whether - has the missile basically knocked that off the table?

AMBASSADOR KING: You know, that's put it out of the range of possibilities right now. Would we consider it in the future? Possibly. Are we considering it now? No. The issue on food aid is that we've got to have confidence that the North Koreans will allow us to monitor the aid in a way that we can satisfy our concerns to see that the food is delivered to those who really are in need. What our intention was, and the programs that we had looked at in the past, was aid programs that would target in particular children under six, pregnant and nursing mothers, and possibly elderly who were not living with younger family members. We were also looking at providing nutritional assistance in a form that would be geared to the needs of those groups. This was done in order to avoid the food being easily transferrable to other segments of the population, like those who wear military uniforms. And what we have tried to do was to develop a program that would be geared at those segments of the population that would be most suitable for them and less available to others, but also to provide a method of monitoring to make certain that the food was going to those groups. I think we had reached what was a fairly good agreement, but where our difficulty is is the question of whether the North Koreans will allow us to implement the agreement, whether they will remain consistent to the agreement that we had reached. So I think the real problem there is one of confidence that the regime is going to allow us to do that.

QUESTION: When you say "food for the elderly or for children," can you give a specific example? How would you guarantee the food wouldn't - would it be baby food? I'm just curious what that means.

AMBASSADOR KING: There are certain kinds of food. For example, it would not be rice. We would not be providing rice, and that's the most transferrable and most desirable commodity. What we were looking at doing was also providing the food through programs in hospitals, nurseries, schools, orphanages, this kind of thing, in settings where we would see that the food was being distributed to the right groups -- where it wasn't simply being diverted to public distribution or something like that.

QUESTION: Miles Edelsten, Associated Press Television. I've just got interested in when you talk about the issue of human rights in North Korea with China, if you talk about it at all with them, because obviously there are issues between the U.S.A. and China about human rights in China. So I was wondering: do you even discuss the issue of human rights in North Korea? Is it not on the agenda at all? Are they perhaps interested because it has relevance with the number of North Koreans fleeing into China? Are they any help on this issue? Is it discussed with them?

AMBASSADOR KING: Generally we don't discuss in detail our diplomatic conversations. We have raised with the Chinese questions about North Koreans who are trying to leave North Korea, and that's been a concern that we've raised with the Chinese. But generally, no, we don't discuss details of North Korea human rights with China.

QUESTION: Kiyoshi Takenaka, Reuters. I was wondering if you have noticed any signs that what's happening in Myanmar, the political transformation, social transformation, all that, I was wondering if that has prompted any change in the leadership in Pyongyang? Maybe what's happening over there is pushing or prompting, urging North Korean leaders to open up their own country or maybe having a totally opposite effect? Could you comment on that?

AMBASSADOR KING: Very clearly, it seems to me that the changes that have taken place in Myanmar, in Burma, are changes that were brought about by the government. This was not a question of something being imposed from the outside. And I think the government there recognized the value of making the changes that they have made. The changes have certainly produced very positive results in terms of lifting of sanctions, in terms of acceptance in the international community that has been the case with Burma over the last several months. I would hope that the North Koreans would see what's happened in Burma and recognize that as something that's positive. It would seem to me that if the leadership in North Korea made moves in the direction that Burma has made, the United States and the rest of the world community would respond the same way they've responded to the changes that are taking place in Burma. North Koreans express concern about sanctions. If the North Koreans move in directions that are positive, that will result in opportunities for the IAEA to monitor nuclear issues, then I think there will be positive movement in other directions as there has been in Burma. I see Burma as a great example of where we'd like to see North Korea going.

#