Critical Questions

North Korean Sentencing of Euna Lee and Laura Ling
Victor D. Cha
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Q1: Why were Euna Lee and Laura Ling, American journalists, detained by the North Koreans?
A1: The two journalists, who work for San Francisco–based Current TV, were doing a story on the Sino–North Korean border about North Korean refugees and about the possible practice of human trafficking of young women. They were reportedly taken by North Korean state security on March 17. The producer/cameraman escaped, but Lee and Ling were captured and taken to Pyongyang.

Q2: What have they been charged with?
A2: Lee and Ling have been charged by the Central Court of North Korea (the highest court in the land) for “committing hostilities against the Korean nation and illegal entry,” according to the North Korean mouthpiece news agency, KCNA. They have been sentenced to 12 years of “reform” in a prison camp. They would be the first Americans to suffer such a fate.

Q3: Is this a harsh sentence?
A3: Yes. According to North Korean law, most experts expected the maximum would be 10 years, not 12.

Q4: Why is the North Korean government doing this? Is it linked to the nuclear crisis?
A4: Contrary to most analyses, I do not think this is directly related to the nuclear crisis or that the two Americans are being held as a bargaining chip. Rather, I believe that the North Koreans are trying to use this case to demonstrate their resolve against perceived efforts by the international community to draw attention to their refugee problem. By sentencing these two harshly, Pyongyang seeks to establish a deterrent to international attempts to report on, or encourage, refugees leaving the country. In the midst of a leadership transition in which the current North Korean leader seeks to transfer power to one of his sons, the threat of North Koreans voting with their feet is perhaps the ultimate threat to the regime.

Q5: Should the United States send an envoy to retrieve these individuals?
A5: Yes. As I have argued in the Washington Post, I believe that a high-level envoy, such as former vice president Al Gore (affiliated with Current TV), should be sent to negotiate the return of the two Americans. North Koreans care a great deal about public face, and sending someone of Gore’s stature would be an eminently credible humanitarian mission. Having participated in a similar mission in April 2007 to North Korea to retrieve the remains of missing American servicemen killed in the Korean war (with Governor Bill Richardson), I understand well that Gore or a similar envoy would have to go with no assurances of the captives’ release, and with little understanding of who in Pyongyang he would be able to meet with to negotiate their return. But negotiating this through intermediaries such as Sweden (the United States’ protecting power in North Korea), China, or Russia is an imperfect substitute to direct negotiations.

Victor D. Cha holds the Korea Chair at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, D.C.

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