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Activist Presents Headache for N.Korea



Robert Park

An evangelical activist who walked across the frozen Duman (or Tumen) river into North Korea on Christmas Eve to demand improvement of human rights got as far as Bangwon-ni village in Hoeryong, North Hamgyong Province, where he was arrested by North Korean boarder guards.

Sources say Robert Park, an ethnic Korean, told them he is an American citizen and came to call for human rights improvements and to urge leader Kim Jong-il "to repent." In response, the guards beat him to within an inch of his life. Even remaining silent while another person denounces the leader or the system is a punishable offence in North Korea, so the guards were unlikely to react with

equanimity in such an uncompromising climate.

The guards then checked Park's passport and reported the event to the provincial office of the State Safety and Security Agency, who relayed it to headquarters. Officers from headquarters arrived within three days and took Park to Pyongyang.

They merely rebuked the guards for being over-zealous in their beating of Park. "I heard from soldiers that he was beaten so severely that he will need several months to recover," said a Hoeryong resident who recently fled to China.

North Korea seems to be in a quandary. Chances are that Park will continue his resistance by going on hunger strike or other means. But since his demands go to the core of what the regime is about, they cannot just leave him alone or release him. If the North decides to release him only because he is an American citizen despite denouncing the North Korean system, the double standards could exacerbate anger among the population, where discontent is already fomenting due to deteriorating living conditions.

Dealing with Park is apparently causing confusion since there is no precedent for such cases in North Korea. Some sources say the regime has to make an example of Park, but the regime will have trouble making any decision as the case is being monitored closely by the U.S. since he is an American citizen. Park's own attitude will therefore play a large part in determining whether he can be subject to some kind of negotiated release.

englishnews@chosun.com / Jan. 18, 2010 12:58 KST

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