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In Rare Encounter, a Private U.S. Delegation Visits North Korea

By RICK GLADSTONE OCT. 7, 2016

A private American delegation visited North Korea last month — two weeks after the country’s most recent nuclear bomb test — in a low-key humanitarian mission carried out with the Obama administration’s support, the organizer and the White House said Friday.

The visit appeared to be the first face-to-face contact in North Korea between such an American delegation and North Korean officials in nearly two years.

Although the visitors were not acting in any American governmental capacity, North Korea’s agreement to receive them suggested that both sides might be seeking an opening, however small, for more engagement — despite tensions over North Korea’s nuclear weapon and missile development that have left the country severely isolated.

The Sept. 24-27 visit was organized by the Richardson Center for Global Engagement, a nonprofit group led by Bill Richardson, a former New Mexico governor and United Nations ambassador, who has served as an intermediary between North Korea and the United States for many years.

In a statement, the group said its delegation had discussed resuming work on recovering the remains of American soldiers from the Korean War; possible help for victims of North Korea's disastrous floods; and an American request that the North release Otto F. Warmbier, a University of Virginia student imprisoned since January.

Mr. Warmbier, who had been on an organized tour of North Korea, was sentenced to 15 years of hard labor on charges that he had tried to steal a political poster from his hotel.

"The Richardson Center delegation was treated well and with respect," the group's statement said. During its meetings, the statement said, "frank and good discussions were held on these issues and very modest progress was made."

Mr. Richardson's top aide, Mickey Bergman, led the delegation, which also included Rick Downes, the president of the Coalition of Families of Korean & Cold War POW/MIAs, and P. Willey a professor and forensic anthropologist at California State University, Chico.

The visitors met with the vice minister of foreign affairs, Han Song-ryol, and other North Korean officials, as well as Sweden's ambassador, Torkel Stiernlof, who looks after American interests in North Korea because the United States and the North have no diplomatic relations.

In a telephone interview, Mr. Bergman said he could not elaborate on what was discussed concerning Mr. Warmbier, who has not received any consular visits since March. Mr. Warmbier's family, from Cincinnati, has declined to talk about his incarceration.

Mr. Bergman said the North Koreans were especially interested in help for areas affected by flooding, which severely ravaged northeastern parts of the country in August and left at least 70,000 people homeless.

"But we have to be able to have the humanitarian interests from our side, such as the return of Otto Warmbier and the recovery of remains of American

servicemen, met as well,” Mr. Bergman said.

Asked to comment on the trip, Ned Price, a spokesman for the National Security Council, said in an emailed statement, “The White House was consulted and is supportive of this humanitarian effort by Governor Richardson’s Center.”

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