



Written by on August 27, 2010

American Held by North Korea Returns Home

Aijalon Mahli Gomes — a U.S. citizen imprisoned in North Korea last January, and later sentenced to eight years of hard labor with a fine of about \$600,000 for the crime of illegally entering North Korea — headed home on August 27. Gomes was accompanied on his homebound trip by former President Jimmy Carter, who had traveled to Pyongyang to negotiate his freedom.



Gomes's reasons for entering North Korea are unknown, but he is believed to be a Christian activist intent on missionary and humanitarian work.

The Carter Center in Atlanta, Georgia, a nongovernmental, not-for-profit organization founded in 1982 by the former President and his wife Rosalyn, issued the following statement on August 27:

At the request of President Carter, and for humanitarian purposes, Mr. Gomes was granted amnesty by the chairman of the National Defense Commission, Kim Jong-Il. It is expected that Mr. Gomes will be returned to Boston, Mass., early Friday afternoon, to be reunited with his mother and other members of his family.

AP reported that Gomes's mother, Jacqueline McCarthy, gathered on the day of his arrival with family and friends at her home in the Boston neighborhood of Mattapan, where they prayed and praised God before leaving for Logan Airport.

"I'm just joyful and grateful that my son is home, and thank President Jimmy Carter for making sure that he was home safely," she said. "I thank God, I thank God, for everything everyone has done for us."

Later in the day the family released a [statement](#), which read, in part:

The family of Aijalon Gomes feels blessed today to be able to welcome Aijalon home and into the arms of all those who love him. This has been a long, dark, and difficult period — for Aijalon and for our family. We are grateful to all the people who made today possible.

First, we want to express heartfelt gratitude to former President Jimmy Carter and the staff of the Carter Center for taking on Aijalon's release as a private humanitarian mission. Thank you, President Carter, for traveling to North Korea to bring Aijalon home.

Thank you to the government of North Korea for caring for Aijalon during his darkest days, then agreeing to release him on humanitarian grounds....

We deeply appreciate the ongoing efforts of a multitude of men and women in the US Department of State who worked so hard for Aijalon's release. And we are so very grateful for the thoughts, prayers and good wishes of so many Americans who shared our pain and can now share our joy.

The communist government had specifically asked for Carter to personally come to Pyongyang as a condition for releasing Gomes and did not miss an opportunity to exploit Gomes's release for maximum



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propaganda value. Its state-run news agency reported that leader Kim Jong Il had granted Carter's request to "leniently forgive" Gomes.

CNN reported that Carter had arrived in Pyongyang on August 25 on a humanitarian mission conducted to negotiate Gomes's release. Carter's visit was a private mission, and was not endorsed by the Obama administration.

South Korea's Yonhap News agency, quoting North Korean media, reported that Carter was greeted upon his arrival by Kim Gye Gwan, North Korea's chief negotiator at the six-party nuclear talks, and also met with Kim Jong Nam, the eldest son of Kim Jong Il, the regime's political head.

There were some hopes that Carter's visit would afford him the opportunity to informally discuss the ongoing tensions between the Pyongyang regime and the West over the North's recent nuclear tests, missile launches, and the March sinking of a South Korean warship. However, such hopes were dashed by reports that Kim Jong Il was away on a trip to China and that Wu Dawei, Pyongyang's vice foreign minister and special representative on Korean Peninsular affairs of China, was on a diplomatic mission to Seoul, and they are the key figures Carter would have had to meet with in order to accomplish anything significant.

"Carter is in to get Gomes out, not to try and restart something," CNN quoted Kim Byung-ki, a security expert at Seoul's Korea University. "If Kim Jong Il is not there, Carter will not be able to meet the top leader, ask questions, interact and get the atmospherics; he can meet [Vice Minister of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs] Kim Gye Gwan and Kim Jong Nam, but they are not the center of power."

Carter's late-in-life role as an elder statesman/negotiator contrasts with the commonly held view that his negotiating power as President was fairly unimpressive, especially his failure to settle the 444-day Iran hostage crisis during the last days of his administration. A summary of the crisis from [Wikipedia](#) notes:

Sixty-six Americans were taken captive when Iranian militants seized the U.S. Embassy in Tehran on Nov. 4, 1979, including three who were at the Iranian Foreign Ministry. Six more Americans escaped and of the 66 who were taken hostage, 13 were released on Nov. 19 and 20, 1979; one was released on July 11, 1980, and the remaining 52 were released on Jan. 20, 1981.

The episode reached a climax when, after failed attempts to negotiate a release, the United States military attempted a rescue operation, Operation Eagle Claw, on April 24, 1980, which resulted in a failed mission, the destruction of two aircraft and the deaths of eight American servicemen and one Iranian civilian. It ended with the signing of the Algiers Accord in Algeria on January 19, 1981. The hostages were formally released into United States custody the following day, just minutes after the new American president Ronald Reagan was sworn in....

In the U.S., some political analysts believe the crisis was a major reason for U.S. President Jimmy Carter's defeat in the November 1980 presidential election. (Emphasis added.)

Than again, some Americans might say that Carter should have been held accountable more for what he *did* accomplish as President than for what he didn't. Most significantly, on September 7, 1977, Carter and Panamanian strongman Omar Torrijos signed the Torrijos-Carter Treaties, which guaranteed that Panama would gain possession of the Panama Canal after 1999. Under the Hay-Bunau Varilla Treaty of 1903, the Panama Canal was U.S. property in perpetuity.

Photo: Former President Jimmy Carter waves to onlookers after arriving at Logan International Airport



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with Aijalon Gomes, right, in Boston, Aug. 27, 2010.: AP Images



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