

## THE GLOBE AND MAIL

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### Carter secures release of American, but likely missed Kim Jong-il

By Paul Koring

From Friday's Globe and Mail

#### *North Korean dictator takes armoured train on unexpected trip to China*

Jimmy Carter secured the release of an American held in North Korea, but didn't likely meet with the country's reclusive dictator, who was reported to have slipped out of the country as the former U.S. president arrived, in the latest bizarre drama involving the unpredictable, nuclear-armed regime.

Kim Jong-il's unexpected trip aboard his armoured train to China - which continues to prop up the unstable and impoverished regime - came amid renewed speculation that the ailing "Dear Leader" plans to publicly designate his 28-year-old youngest son, Kim Jong-un, as his successor.

"It's very surprising but perhaps it's a way of showing that relations with China will always take precedence," said Scott Snyder, adjunct senior fellow for Korea studies at the Council on Foreign Relations. "The wild card is [North Korean] domestic politics and we just don't have a grasp of how that will play out."

The midnight foray by the North Korean leader's luxurious train across the Yalu River came only hours after Mr. Carter's jet touched down in Pyongyang. The 85-year-old former president's private mission brokered the release of Aijalon Mahli Gomes, a 31-year-old, devout Christian who walked alone into North Korea last January, apparently in sympathy with brutally oppressed North Koreans. Mr. Gomes was sentenced to eight years hard labour, although it was widely expected that he would be released to Mr. Carter in a reprise of the carefully scripted visit last August during which former president Bill Clinton left with two American TV journalists who had been seized along the Chinese-North Korean frontier.

North Korea granted an amnesty for Mr. Gomes, Carter Center spokeswoman Deanna Congileo said late Thursday, and the former president was to return to the United States with him Friday.



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American Aijalon Mahli Gomes was released from North Korea after a visit from former U.S. president Jimmy Carter.

But instead of the expected photo opportunities between the former president and the leader of the world's last neo-Stalinist regime, speculation swirled as to whether Mr. Kim's sudden trip to China reflected a crisis or whether there was a deliberate attempt to snub Mr. Carter.

"If you want to be seen and talked about internationally, then hosting a former U.S. president makes more sense than a sudden trip to China," said Doug Bandow, author of *The Korean Conundrum* and a foreign-policy scholar at the conservative Cato Institute.

It isn't clear whether Mr. Kim plans to meet top Chinese leaders or how long the visit will last. A swirl of unconfirmed reports said he had taken his chosen heir, already called the "Brilliant Comrade," with him and visited a school where his father, Kim Il-sung, studied Communism, in the Chinese city of Jilin.

North Korea's Workers Party Congress is due to convene - for the first time since 1966 - next month and the little-known heir apparent is expected to be named to a major post.

Kim Jong-il, who suffered a stroke two years ago, reportedly is suffering from terminal pancreatic cancer and looked thin and weak in photographs taken during Mr. Clinton's visit last year.

Although the Obama administration has made clear that the forays by ex-presidents have no official approval, they are seen as a useful and high-profile channel of communication with the unpredictable regime that defiantly developed nuclear weapons and routinely threatens to wage war against the United States.


"The Obama administration must be pretty skeptical that they can do any sort of deal with the [North Korean] regime but there are no other good options," Mr. Bandow said. "Sanctions won't work unless the Chinese back them, and the military option is simply a bad one."

Mr. Carter, who had been expected to leave Pyongyang on Thursday, prolonged his visit to secure Mr. Gomes's release.

Tensions between North and South Korea - still technically at war nearly half a century after a ceasefire ended three years of bloody conflict and left the peninsula divided - have risen in recent months following allegations that a North Korean submarine sank a South Korean warship and a subsequent show of force that included a U.S. nuclear-powered aircraft carrier and the imposition of additional sanctions by Washington.

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