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OBAMA LETTER CONTRADICTS STATE DEPARTMENT'S NORTH KOREAN TERRORISM TIMELINE

By Dennis P. Halpin

The recently released [2012 Country Report on Terrorism](#) repeats the U.S. State Department's assertion, "The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) is not known to have sponsored any terrorist acts since the bombing of a Korean Airlines flight in 1987." Perhaps the report's drafters should have checked with the President before they made this indefensible claim. In 2005, then-Senator Barack Obama expressed a decidedly different view of Pyongyang's terrorist activities.

In January of that year the Senator became a signatory to a [letter from the Illinois Congressional delegation](#), organized by delegation dean Henry Hyde, to the North Korean UN Mission. The letter was in response to the continued pleas from Illinois constituent Young Hwa (Esther) Kim regarding the abduction and murder of her husband. The Reverend Kim Dong-Shik, a U.S. permanent resident, was abducted by North Korean agents in the Chinese border city of Yanji on a Sunday in January 2000, after church services. He was taken across the Tumen River into North Korea allegedly for having "opened a new route on the underground railway" that assisted Northern refugees escape to the South.¹

The letter had as its lead signers then-Speaker of the House Dennis Hastert, Representative Henry Hyde, and two Senators, Richard Durbin and Barack Obama. It also likened Reverend Kim's work to that of Harriet Tubman and Raoul Wallenberg, two renowned rescuers of the oppressed. The letter concludes:

We view Kim Dong-Shik as also being a hero who assisted with the escape of the powerless and forgotten. We, therefore, wish to inform the Government of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) that we will NOT support the removal of your government from

the State Department list of State Sponsors of Terrorism until such time, among other reasons, as a full accounting is provided to the Kim family regarding the fate of the Reverend Kim Dong-Shik following his abduction into North Korea five years ago.

It is a clear, unconditional statement.

The last time I heard from Esther Kim she had not received one word from the North Koreans, either directly or through the State Department. She had been informed from defectors, however, that her husband, who was in frail health, had died of torture for refusing to renounce his Christian faith. Esther had been told that his corpse was at a North Korean military base. All she wanted, at this late date, was her husband's remains so that a funeral could be held for him at her Korean-American church in Chicago.

A sad story but not terrorism? When American journalist Daniel Pearl was murdered in Pakistan in 2002, the U.S. Government designated the group responsible for his death, the Lashkar I Jhangvi, as a Foreign Terrorist Organization in its 2002 *Patterns of Global Terrorism* report. Doesn't that make North Korean security services, responsible for the abduction and reported murder of Reverend Kim, the husband of a U.S. citizen, a Foreign Terrorist Organization as well?

Other egregious examples of post-1987 North Korean terrorist involvement include the following:

- **Vladivostok, October 1996:** A South Korean diplomat was murdered outside his apartment by unknown assailants. Poison entered his blood stream through two puncture holes found on his body—poison of the same type carried

one month earlier by a North Korean special operations submarine team. On September 18, a North Korean Shark-class submarine with a crew of 26 Special Operations soldiers from the General Reconnaissance Bureau had landed on South Korea's east coast on a secret mission to infiltrate the South. Twenty-four of these North Koreans spies were shot dead, including 11 who were shot in a group suicide, and one was captured. North Korea ratcheted up its threatening rhetoric, denied any hostile intent, and warned of "serious consequences" if the vessel or crew were harmed. Days later, the South Korean diplomat was assassinated in Vladivostok.² When I visited Vladivostok in 2003, local Russian authorities said robbery was not a motive in the still unsolved case—the victim's money and watch were intact.

- **Seoul, February 1997:** North Korean defector Lee Han Young, the nephew of Kim Jong Il's mistress, was fatally shot in a city where no civilians carry guns. Lee had sold his story to South Korean newspapers and later wrote a tell-all book on the Kim family, breaking the North Korean code of silence. Kim Jong Il also wanted to send a message to the famous North Korean defector Hwang Jang Yop, who was then hiding in the South Korean consulate in Beijing. Prior to Lee's death, the South Korean Home Affairs Minister called the shooting "an assassination attempt by North Korean infiltrators," according to a government statement.³
- **Washington, April 2004:** Ambassador Cofer Black, U.S. State Department Coordinator for Counterterrorism, stated publicly that several issues still needed to be resolved before Pyongyang could be removed from the (State Sponsors of Terrorism) list, including the issue of Japanese abductees in North Korea.⁴ This was taken by Tokyo as a firm commitment of linkage between abductions and the terrorism list. There was a profound sense of disappointment

when I visited Japan in the summer of 2008 as Washington prepared to remove North Korea from the list (as happened in October 2008) without progress on the abduction issue.

- **London, December 2005:** During a Transatlantic Legislators' Dialogue (TLD) meeting between U.S. Representatives and their EU counterparts, London papers reported on a warrant issued in Belfast for IRA veteran Sean Garland's arrest after he failed to appear for an extradition hearing.⁵ Garland, wanted by Washington for assisting Pyongyang in the distribution of counterfeit U.S. "supernotes," had slipped into the Irish Republic to avoid British authorities. Head of the U.S. TLD delegation, Representative Darrell Issa, asked me, as the only Asia hand on the trip—I was there for a China seminar—to discuss Garland with the Irish parliamentarian. Unfortunately, Garland continues to this day to avoid extradition.
- **Syrian Desert, September 2007:** Israel launched a preemptive strike to destroy an unfinished nuclear reactor being built for Syria by North Korean scientists. This reactor concerned House Members as Six-Party negotiations moved forward with North Korea. Supplying a State Sponsor of Terrorism with a plutonium facility was viewed as support for terrorism.⁶
- **Tokyo, May 2010:** The Israeli Foreign Minister informed his Japanese counterparts and the press that an aircraft seized at Bangkok in December 2009 was loaded with North Korean weapons for Hamas and Hezbollah.⁷
- **Washington, May 2013:** Bruce Bechtol, Jr., former U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency analyst, claimed during a Heritage Foundation seminar that "North Korea continues to give military assistance to terrorist organizations around the world under new leader Kim Jong-un." Bechtol said that Pyongyang's Cold War network facilitates

weapons supply to several Foreign Terrorist Organizations, including the Tamil Tigers, Hezbollah, Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps, al-Qaeda, and al-Shabab.⁸

In light of these disturbing facts, perhaps the State Department should consider a rewrite of its Country Reports section on North Korea?

(Endnotes)

¹ Andrew Salmon, "Seoul charges suspect in North Korea kidnapping case," *The New York Times*, December 15, 2004, http://www.nytimes.com/2004/12/15/news/15iht-korea_ed3__0.html?_r=1&.

² Nate Thayer, "The Spy Sub, A Poisoned Diplomat in Russia, and a Naked, Drunk American Preacher in Pyongyang," Nate Thayer blog, <http://natethayer.wordpress.com/2012/09/19/the-north-korean-spy-sub-the-poisoned-diplomat-in-russia-and-the-naked-drunk-american-preacher-in-pyongyang/>.

³ Andrew Pollack, "Korean Shooting is Casting Cloud on Signs of Thaw," *The New York Times*, February 17, 1997, <http://www.nytimes.com/1997/02/17/world/korean-shooting-is-casting-cloud-on-signs-of-thaw.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm>.

⁴ "Abduction issue key to N. Korea removal from terror list: U.S.," *Kyodo News*, April 1, 2004.

⁵ David McKittrick, "The Ira Bagman and Kim Jong Il's hot dollars," *The Independent*, December 8, 2005, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/the-ira-bagman-and-kim-jong-ils-hot-dollars-518572.html>.

⁶ Daryl G. Kimball, "North Korea and the Incident in the Syrian Desert," *Arms Control Today*, May 2008, http://www.armscontrol.org/act/2008_05/focus.

⁷ Yoko Kubota, "Israel says seized North Korean arms were for Hamas, Hezbollah," Reuters, May 12, 2010, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2010/05/12/us-israel-korea-north-idUSTRE64B18520100512>.

⁸ "N.Korea 'Supplies Arms to Terrorists,'" *Chosun Ilbo*, May 31, 2013, http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2013/05/31/2013053100738.html.

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