

# US boy returns from outreach visit to North Korea

By CHRISTOPHER BODEEN (AP) – 4 days ago

BEIJING — A 13-year-old American boy who made a rare visit to Pyongyang says officials there welcomed his idea for a "children's peace forest" in the demilitarized zone dividing North and South Korea, although they said it would only happen if the countries signed a peace treaty first.

Jonathan Lee returned Thursday from an eight-day visit to the reclusive country during which he was taken on a tour of the DMZ. A hoped-for meeting with North Korean leader Kim Jong Il did not materialize, although Lee said the officials forwarded to Kim a letter from him.

"On this trip, I discovered that both sides want reunification and that Korea is one, so I see hope on the Korean peninsula," Lee, who made the visit with his parents, Kyoung and Melissa Lee, told The Associated Press.

Impoverished North Korea is one of the most isolated countries in the world and its hard-line communist regime is under United Nations sanctions for launching missiles and refusing to comply with nuclear weapons inspections. Since the 1950-53 Korean War ended with a cease-fire and not an armistice, the U.S., South Korea and North Korea remain technically at war.

Lee, of Ridgeland, Mississippi, said the officials told him his proposed children's forest was dependent on North Korea first signing a peace treaty with the United States to formally end the war — a longstanding demand of Pyongyang's.

The 2 1/2 mile (4 kilometer)-wide DMZ is the most heavily guarded border in the world, sealed off with electric fences and studded with land mines, watchtowers and military bases.

Despite the political hurdles, Lee said he'll continue pushing the idea for a peace forest to allow interaction between children from the two sides and hopes to visit the North again next year.

The lack of diplomatic relations between Pyongyang and Washington makes private visits to the North by Americans extremely rare. In recent months North Korea has detained four Americans for illegal entry, and one is still in prison there.

Melissa Lee said concerns about the family's safety in the north had proved unfounded. "We were taken care of. At no point did I feel unsafe," she said.

Although initially taken aback by her son's desire to visit the North, she said the trip proved to be a moving experience. "For him to want to do this on his own, I'm fairly proud of him. He may not have met (Kim), but the fact that he did it was something," she said.

The Lee family said they received permission this summer to visit North Korea from the country's representative to the United Nations. Visas were granted last week in Beijing.

Home video shot by the family during their visit showed Jonathan Lee talking to tourists inside a meeting room at the DMZ, presenting flowers at a children's music performance, and visiting a museum, library and Pyongyang's famed mass games.

In his letter submitted to the North Korean leader, Lee said he wrote that former South Korean President Kim Dae-jung had talked with him about his "sunshine policy" of peaceful coexistence with the North.

That policy of rapprochement has been abandoned by the current conservative South Korean government, and relations between Seoul and Pyongyang are at their most tense in years.

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Jonathan Lee, center, is surrounded by journalists after he returned from North Korea at the airport in Beijing, China Thursday, Aug. 19, 2010. A 13-year-old American boy who made a rare visit to North Korea said officials there welcomed his proposal for a children's peace forest in the demilitarized zone dividing the North from South Korea. (AP Photo/Andy Wong)