

Tech delegation pressing NKorea Internet openness

JEAN H. LEE - Associated Press - Associated Press

PYONGYANG, North Korea (AP) — A private delegation including Google's Eric Schmidt is urging North Korea to allow more open Internet access and cellphones to benefit its citizens, the mission's leader said Wednesday in the country with some of the world's tightest controls on information.

Former New Mexico Gov. Bill Richardson also said his nine-member group called on North Korea to put a moratorium on missile launches and nuclear tests that have prompted U.N. sanctions, and the delegation asked for fair and humane treatment for an American citizen detained. He spoke in an exclusive interview in Pyongyang with The Associated Press.

The visit has been criticized for appearing to hijack U.S. diplomacy and boost Pyongyang's profile after North Korea's latest, widely condemned rocket launch. Richardson has said the delegation is on a private, humanitarian trip.

Schmidt, the executive chairman of the U.S.-based Internet giant Google, is the highest-profile American business executive to visit North Korea since leader Kim Jong Un took power a year ago.

On Wednesday, Schmidt toured the frigid quarters of the brick building in central Pyongyang that is the heart of North Korea's own computer industry. He asked pointed questions about North Korea's new tablet computers as well as its Red Star operating system, and he briefly donned a pair of 3-D goggles during a tour of the Korea Computer Center.

Schmidt has not said publicly what he hopes to get out of his visit to North Korea. However, he has been a vocal proponent of Internet freedom and openness, and is publishing a book in April with Google Ideas think tank director Jared Cohen about the power of global connectivity in transforming people's lives, policies and politics.

Richardson told The Associated Press that his delegation was bringing a message that more openness would benefit North Korea. Most in the country have never logged onto the Internet, and the authoritarian government strictly limits access to the World Wide Web.

"The citizens of the DPRK (North Korea) will be better off with more cellphones and an active Internet. Those are the ... messages we've given to a variety of foreign policy officials, scientists" and government officials, Richardson said.

The four-day trip, which began Monday, is taking place at a delicate time in U.S.-North Korean relations. Less than a month ago, North Korea shot a satellite into

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space on a long-range rocket, a launch widely celebrated in Pyongyang but condemned by Washington and others as a banned test of missile technology.

The State Department criticized the trip as "unhelpful" at a time when the U.S. is rallying support for U.N. Security Council action.

Spokesman Peter Velasco said from Washington that he did not believe the delegation had been in contact with U.S. officials since they arrived in Pyongyang.

However, Richardson said the delegation has pressed the North Koreans for a moratorium on missile launches and nuclear tests.

In 2006 and 2009, North Korea followed up similar launches with nuclear tests. Pyongyang is believed to be working on mastering technology that would allow it to mount a nuclear device on a long-range rocket capable of striking the United States.

Richardson also said the delegation is pushing for "fair and humane treatment" of an American, Kenneth Bae, now in North Korean custody on suspicion of committing "hostile" acts against the state.

The group also has urged government officials and scientists to offer more cellphones and to open up the Internet to the North Korean people, he said.

North Korea has exercised strict control over its population of 24 million since it was founded by Kim Il Sung in 1948, including tight rules on the flow of information and close monitoring of the people's interaction with the outside world.

But as the Asian nation's tiny economy has languished in its isolation, the government has sought in recent years to turn its economy around by carefully and cautiously reaching out to foreign nations — primarily neighboring China and Southeast Asian allies — for help.

Young North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, who took power a year ago following the death of his father, Kim Jong Il, has made improving the economy a focal point of national policy for 2013, and has urged the people to expand their knowledge of science and technology to reach that goal.

Across the snowy capital, new propaganda signs and slogans reiterate those goals, exhorting the people to "break through the cutting edge" and "push back the frontiers" of science and technology in the spirit of the Dec. 12 space launch.

The number of cell phone users has surpassed 1.5 million in a few short years, with help from the Egyptian telecommunications giant Orascom, which provides a 3G cell phone service.

However, offering open Internet access has not been part of the strategy. Experts see North Korea as one of the least connected countries in the world.

Though global broadband Internet is available in North Korea, few have permission

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to log onto the World Wide Web. Those with computers and Internet access typically are restricted to a domestic Intranet site that filters the information and publications available to North Koreans.

On Tuesday, Schmidt, Richardson and their delegation chatted with students at Pyongyang's elite Kim Il Sung University who have permission to access the global Internet for research purposes.

On Wednesday, the group toured the main library in Pyongyang, the Grand People's Study House, where locals still in their winter coats were crowded into drafty, unheated halls at computers with Intranet access to the library's archive of books, documents and newspapers.

Later, the delegation visited the multi-story Korea Computer Center, the hub of North Korea's software and computer product development, where a quote from Kim Jong Il reads: "Now is the era for science and technology. It is the era of computers."

Inside an atrium exhibition hall lined with widescreen displays showing off North Korea's computer products, the Google group fiddled around with the new Samjiyon tablet computer utilizing foreign-made hardware and North Korean software and linked to the Internet through a wifi router.

They learned about North Korea's data encryption software, face recognition devices, video chat room software and instant messaging services.

So far, the computer center has teamed up with nations including China, Russia and India to develop products — but is hoping to reach out to establish partnerships with other countries also, officials told Schmidt and Richardson.

Schmidt, who as chief executive of Google until 2011 oversaw the Internet search provider's expansion into a global Internet giant, speaks frequently about the importance of providing people around the world with Internet access and technology.

Google now has offices in more than 40 countries, including Russia, South Korea and China, another country criticized for systematic Internet censorship.

There are no major U.S. firms operating in North Korea, which fought against the United States in the Korean War of the 1950s. The foes signed a truce in 1953 to end the fighting, but never a peace treaty, and the two countries still do not have diplomatic relations.

U.N. sanctions ban the trade with North Korea of weapons and items that could be used for nuclear purposes, as well as luxury items. The U.S. also prohibits the import of North Korean-made goods into the United States.

Some conservatives in the United States have had harsh criticism of the Schmidt-Richardson trip.

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Schmidt and Richardson "have joined the long list of Americans and others used by the Kim family dictatorship for political advantage," John Bolton, who served as U.S. ambassador to the United Nations during the George W. Bush administration, wrote in the New York Daily News.

"North Korea has repeatedly welcomed prominent Americans to help elevate its stature. It is seeking direct negotiations with Washington, for in the distorted vision of the nation's leadership, this might lead to full diplomatic recognition and 'equal' status in the world community."

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