

Rodman 'sorry,' unable to aid imprisoned missionary

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BEIJING (RNS) Former NBA star Dennis Rodman, the only foreigner with access to North Korea's reclusive dictator Kim Jong Un, returned from Pyongyang Monday defending his controversial "basketball diplomacy" there.

Americans and North Koreans "can actually get along," said Rodman, who apologized he "couldn't do anything" about Kenneth Bae, a Korean American missionary imprisoned in North Korea for more than a year.

Rodman will return to Pyongyang in about a month for another game of basketball, he said, following the exhibition game last Wednesday between a North Korean team and a Rodman-led team of a team of ex-NBA players and current streetballers.

The ex-Chicago Bulls forward sang "Happy Birthday" to Kim before tip-off, and spent the second half sitting beside the person he calls his "friend for life." Kim is reported to be a Chicago Bulls fan.

Rights groups and U.S. politicians have criticized Rodman for engaging with the North's repressive regime. While in Pyongyang, he was forced to apologize for comments last week that blamed Bae for his own incarceration.

At Beijing's airport Monday, at the end of his fourth trip to Pyongyang over the past 12 months, Rodman said "I'm sorry that I couldn't do anything," when asked if had raised Bae's case with Kim.

Former boxer Mike Tyson has accused Rodman of committing treason, but the former all-star defended his patriotism and his purpose Monday.

“I love my country America, I love it, I’d never trade it for nothing in the world,” he said. Distancing himself from politics and “all that stuff,” Rodman said “I’m not the president, I’m not an ambassador, I’m Dennis Rodman, just (an) individual. Just showing the world the fact that that we can actually get along and be happy for one day. I’d love to see (it).”

At least one of Rodman’s 10 teammates, who all left North Korea last week, has expressed regrets about joining the trip. Eric “Sleepy” Floyd told ESPN Friday he was “misled” about the trip, did not expect to meet Kim Jong Un and said he tried to leave the day after the players arrived last Monday. Floyd was the first to leave, last Thursday.

Charles Smith, who has emerged as the spokesman for the players, offering a calmer voice and perspective than Rodman’s often emotional and alcohol-influenced outbursts, told CNN Sunday he had no regrets about going to North Korea. He said the players were not paid by North Korea for the trip.

“Where it goes from there, I do not know at this point in time,” Smith said. “But we established a relationship. They’ve asked us to come back.”