

## SCIENCE DIPLOMACY

# Travel ban would slam university in North Korea

Pyongyang University chancellor speaks out on ban's consequences and on university-affiliated detainees

By Richard Stone

This has been a tough year for North Korea's Pyongyang University of Science and Technology (PUST). The university, founded by a Korean-American and one of the isolated nation's top schools, was sucked into a political maelstrom this spring when the government arrested two Korean-Americans affiliated with the university. And now it's facing a potentially devastating blow: As *Science* went to press, the U.S. Department of State was preparing to impose a ban on travel by any U.S. passport holder to North Korea, effective next month. PUST President Yu-Taik Chon and some 40 PUST faculty and lecturers are U.S. citizens.

Department of State guidance notes that it is "establishing a process" for U.S. citizens to apply for a limited validity passport and "special validation" to travel to North Korea for "certain purposes," including humanitarian work. In the meantime, it urges all U.S. citizens to depart North Korea and cancel any imminent travel.

The ban could leave PUST administrators scrambling to find replacement faculty for the upcoming fall term. And it would compound earlier woes. On 22 April, authorities detained Sang-duk "Tony" Kim, who had spent several weeks teaching accounting at PUST, over "criminal acts of hostility aimed to overturn" the North Korean government. Barely 2 weeks later, Hak-song Kim, who managed an experimental farm for PUST, was arrested; he was accused of unspecified "hostile acts." A U.S. State Department envoy who visited the hostages last month, and a third Korean-American detainee not connected with PUST, found them to be in good health. According to

sources, the PUST-affiliated detainees told the official that they are being held in isolation, individually, in a hotel and that their main daily activity is writing confessions to their alleged crimes. (The State Department notes that the detainees are exempted from the travel prohibition.)

PUST officials have stressed that neither of the detainees has yet been charged with a crime and that the allegations are unrelated to their work at the university, located on the southern edge of Pyongyang.

Still, the back-to-back arrests have cast an uncomfortable spotlight on PUST. And the university's operations could grow more complicated as the United States and other countries mull additional sanctions on North Korea over its test of an intercontinental ballistic missile earlier this month.

Since PUST took in its first 50 students in 2010, the student body has steadily grown; enrollment now stands at 450 undergraduates and 90 graduate stu-

dents. And PUST plans to open a medical school, now under construction, at the end of this year.

Though many observers have praised the university as a bold experiment in academic diplomacy, it has its detractors. Critics have asserted, for instance, that the university's computer science courses train future North Korean hackers and cyberwarriors. PUST Chancellor Chan-Mo Park, 82, a computer scientist and former president of South Korea's Pohang University of Science and Technology, rejects that charge. A South Korea-born U.S. citizen and, like most of the rest of PUST's foreign faculty, a devout Christian, Park sat down with *Science* to discuss recent developments. This interview has been edited for brevity and clarity.



Chancellor Chan-Mo Park says a travel ban would damage Pyongyang University.

**Q: If U.S. citizens are barred from travel to North Korea to teach at PUST, how would that affect your university?**

**A:** We would have to find faculty from other countries. North Korean professors could teach some courses, but only a few of them teach in English, and we have been advocating that all PUST courses must be taught in English. So this would definitely damage the current program. It's really discouraging to me.

**Q: What efforts has PUST undertaken on the behalf of Tony Kim and Hak-song Kim?**

**A:** Since their arrests were not related to their work with PUST, professors and staff members could not do anything—except pray hard.

**Q: Has their detainment affected perceptions of the university outside North Korea?**

**A:** Many people, especially our families and supporters, were very surprised and worried about the security of U.S. citizens at PUST. Nevertheless, it is my understanding that most of the summer school teachers [from the United States] are now on campus.

**Q: Have sanctions imposed on North Korea harmed PUST?**

**A:** Due to [United Nations] sanctions, since early last year it became hard to send money to China to buy research equipment and materials [for PUST]. Sanctions imposed by South Korea prohibit South Korean nationals from visiting North Korea, so scholars from the south cannot come to PUST to teach. And some countries—for example, Germany and Italy—did not give visas to PUST students who were admitted to graduate school at universities such as Göttingen, Sannio, and Brescia.

**Q: What assurances can you give that PUST graduates do not end up working for the North Korean military?**

**A:** I can assure you that PUST does not help train hackers and "cyberwarriors" at all. Recently, Thae Yong-ho, a former councilor in North Korea's embassy in the U.K. who defected to South Korea, told reporters at South Korea's National Assembly that he did not think PUST was teaching hacking. He added that in North Korea, they teach hacking to selected middle school students who show talent with computers. Most of our graduates go into the academic sector as instructors or researchers. Some go on for graduate study in foreign universities or get jobs in North Korean companies in foreign countries like China and Malaysia. Misunderstanding and groundless accusations hurt the progress of PUST. ■

# Science

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