

Google executive chairman arrives in North Korea (Update)

January 7 2013, by Jean H. Lee



Executive Chairman of Google Eric Schmidt, center, arrives at Pyongyang International Airport in Pyongyang, North Korea on Monday, Jan. 7, 2013. Schmidt arrived in the North Korean capital along with former New Mexico Gov. Bill Richardson. Richardson called the trip to North Korea a private humanitarian visit. (AP Photo/David Guttenfelder)

(AP)—Google's chairman wants a first-hand look at North Korea's economy and social media during his private visit Monday to the

communist nation, his delegation said, despite misgivings in Washington over the timing of the trip.

Eric Schmidt, executive chairman of one of the world's biggest Internet companies, is the highest-profile U.S. executive to visit North Korea—a country with notoriously restrictive online policies—since young leader Kim Jong Un took power a year ago. His visit has drawn criticism from the U.S. State Department because it comes only weeks after a controversial North Korean rocket launch; it has also prompted speculation about what the businessman hopes to accomplish.

Schmidt arrived on a commercial Air China flight with former New Mexico Gov. Bill Richardson, who has traveled more than a half-dozen times to North Korea over the past 20 years.

Richardson, speaking ahead of the flight from Beijing, called the trip a private, humanitarian mission.

"This is not a Google trip, but I'm sure he's interested in some of the economic issues there, the social media aspect. So this is why we are teamed up on this," Richardson said without elaborating on what he meant by the "social media aspect."

"We'll meet with North Korean political leaders. We'll meet with North Korean economic leaders, military. We'll visit some universities. We don't control the visit. They will let us know what the schedule is when we get there," he said.

U.S. officials have criticized the four-day trip. North Korea on Dec. 12 fired a satellite into space using a long-range rocket. Washington condemned the launch, which it considers a test of ballistic missile technology, as a violation of U.N. Security Council resolutions barring Pyongyang from developing its nuclear and missile programs. The

Security Council is deliberating whether to take further action.

"We don't think the timing of the visit is helpful, and they are well aware of our views," State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland told reporters last week.



Executive Chairman of Google Eric Schmidt, left, disembarks from an airport transfer bus after arriving at Pyongyang International Airport in Pyongyang, North Korea on Monday, Jan. 7, 2013. Behind him, from left to right, are Google Ideas think tank director Jared Cohen and former New Mexico Gov. Bill Richardson. Richardson called the trip to North Korea a private humanitarian visit. (AP Photo/David Guttenfelder)

The trip was planned well before North Korea announced its plans to send a satellite into space, two people with knowledge of the delegation's plans told The Associated Press. AP first reported the group's plans last

Thursday.

Schmidt, a staunch proponent of Internet connectivity and openness, is expected to make a donation during the visit, while Richardson will try to discuss the detainment of a U.S. citizen jailed in Pyongyang, members of the delegation told AP. They asked not to be named, saying the trip was a private visit.

"We're going to try to inquire the status, see if we can see him, possibly lay the groundwork for him coming home," Richardson said of the U.S. citizen. "I heard from his son who lives in Washington state, who asked me to bring him back. I doubt we can do it on this trip."

The visit comes just days after Kim, who took power following the Dec. 17, 2011, death of his father, Kim Jong Il, laid out a series of policy goals for North Korea in a lengthy New Year's speech. He cited expanding science and technology as a means to improving the country's economy as a key goal for 2013.

North Korea's economy has languished for decades, particularly after the collapse of the Soviet Union, which since the mid-1940s had provided the country with an economic safety net. North Korea, which has very little arable land, has relied on outside help to feed its people since a famine in the 1990s.

In recent years, North Korea has aimed to modernize its farms and digitize its factories. Farmers told the AP that management policies were revamped to encourage production by providing workers with incentives.

Computer and cellphone use is gaining ground in North Korea's larger cities.



Former New Mexico Gov. Bill Richardson, left, and Executive Chairman of Google, Eric Schmidt, disembark from an airport transfer bus after arriving at Pyongyang International Airport in Pyongyang, North Korea on Monday, Jan. 7, 2013. Richardson called the trip to North Korea a private humanitarian visit. In the background is Google Ideas think tank director, Jared Cohen. (AP Photo/David Guttenfelder)

However, most North Koreans only have access to a domestic Intranet system, not the World Wide Web. For North Koreans, Internet use is still strictly regulated and allowed only with approval.

Schmidt, who oversaw Google'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 all three of North Korea's neighbors: Russia, South Korea and China, another

country criticized for systematic Internet censorship.

Accompanying Schmidt is Jared Cohen, a former U.S. State Department policy and planning adviser who heads Google's New York-based think tank. The two collaborated on a book about the Internet's role in shaping society called "The New Digital Age" that comes out in April.

Also leading the delegation is Kun "Tony" Namkung, a Korea expert who has made frequent trips to North Korea over the past 25 years and has worked as a consultant for The Associated Press.

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