

After 18 months in captivity, US student freed by North Korea in a coma dies

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Cincinnati: An American college student who was released by North Korea in a coma last week after almost a year and a half in captivity, died on Monday, his family said. Suffering from severe brain damage, 22-year-old Otto Warmbier was medically evacuated to the United States on Tuesday last week. He died six days later surrounded by family members in his home town of Cincinnati, Ohio.

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He "has completed his journey home," Warmbier's relatives said in a statement.

"Unfortunately, the awful, torturous mistreatment our son received at the hands of the North Koreans ensured that no other outcome was possible beyond the sad one we experienced today," his parents said. They did not cite a specific cause of death.

Doctors had described his condition as a state of "unresponsive wakefulness" and said he suffered a "severe neurological injury" of unknown cause.

His father, Fred Warmbier, said last week that he believed Otto had been fighting for months to stay alive to return to his family. The family said he looked uncomfortable and anguished after arriving June 13 but his countenance later changed.

"He was peace. He was home, and we believe he could sense that," they said.

Warmbier, a University of Virginia student, was sentenced to 15 years in prison with hard labor after being convicted of trying to steal a propaganda banner from a North Korean hotel. He was visiting the country with a tour group when he was caught and convicted of subversion. He was put before North Korean officials and journalists for a televised "confession."

"I have made the worst mistake of my life!" he exclaimed, choking up as he begged to be allowed to reunite with his parents and two younger siblings.

He was held for more than 17 months. His family said it was told he had been in a coma since soon after his March 2016 sentencing.

Doctors said he suffered extensive loss of brain tissue and "profound weakness and contraction" of his muscles, arms and legs. His eyes opened and blinked but without any sign that he understood verbal commands or his surroundings.

Unresponsive wakefulness is a new medical term for persistent vegetative state. Patients in this condition who have survived a coma can open their eyes, but they do not respond to commands. People can live in a state of unresponsive wakefulness for many years with the chances of recovery depending on the extent of the brain injury.

North Korea said Warmbier went into a coma after contracting botulism and taking a sleeping pill. Doctors in Cincinnati said they found no active sign of botulism or evidence of beatings.

His parents told The Associated Press the day of his release that they wanted "the world to know how we and our son have been brutalized and terrorized by the pariah regime."

Fred Warmbier praised his son's "performance" and President Donald Trump's administration. He was critical of the approach to his son's situation taken by former President Barack Obama's administration.

Lashing out at Pyongyang after news of his death, Trump said, "A lot of bad things happened, but at least we got him home to be with his parents." He called North Korea a "brutal regime."

In a separate statement, Trump said, "Otto's fate deepens my Administration's determination to prevent such tragedies from befalling innocent people at the hands of regimes that do not respect the rule of law or basic human decency."

"The United States once again condemns the brutality of the North Korean regime as we mourn its latest victim."

Otto Warmbier grew up in the Cincinnati suburb of Wyoming. He was salutatorian of his 2013 class at a highly rated high school and was on the soccer team. He had had planned to study in China in his third year of college and heard about Chinese travel companies offering trips to North Korea.

Young Pioneer Tours described itself as providing "budget tours to destinations your mother would rather you stayed away from." Its travel options also included Iran, Iraq and former Soviet countries.

Warmbier was leaving North Korea on January 2, 2016, when he was detained at the airport.

The U.S. Department of State warns against travel to North Korea. While nearly all Americans who have been there have left without incident, visitors can be seized and face lengthy incarceration for what might seem like minor infractions.

Jeffrey Fowle, also from Ohio, was detained in 2014 when he intentionally left a Bible in a nightclub. Fowle was freed after six months. He said he was kept isolated most of the time but not physically abused. He and others freed from North Korea have said they were coached and coerced into giving confessions.

Three Americans remain held in North Korea. The U.S. government accuses North Korea of using such detainees as political pawns. North Korea accuses Washington and South Korea of sending spies to overthrow its government.

At the time of Warmbier's release, a White House official said Joseph Yun, the U.S. envoy on North Korea, had met with North Korean foreign ministry representatives in Norway the previous month. Such direct consultations between the two governments are rare because they do not have formal diplomatic relations.

Yun learned about Warmbier's condition in a meeting a week before the release from the North Korean ambassador at the U.N. in New York. Yun then was dispatched to North Korea and visited Warmbier June 12 with two doctors and demanded his release on humanitarian grounds.

- (With AP inputs)