North Korea Loosens Restrictions on Foreign Cellphones

Jean H. Lee, Associated Press

PYONGYANG, North Korea (AP) — North Korea is loosening some restrictions on foreign cellphones by allowing visitors to bring their own phones into the country. However, security regulations still prohibit mobile phone calls between foreigners and locals.

For years, North Korea required visitors to relinquish foreign cellphones at the border until their departure, leaving many tourists without an easy way to communicate with the outside world.

The ritual of handing over phones was part of an exhaustive security check that most visitors face at immigration in North Korea. Many foreigners — including Eric Schmidt, the executive chairman of Google, who traveled to North Korea earlier this month — choose to leave their phones behind in Beijing before flying to Pyongyang.

Now, foreigners can bring wideband, WCDMA-compatible mobile phones into the country or rent a local handset at the airport, and purchase a local SIM card for use in North Korea. The SIM card allows them to call most foreign countries, foreign embassies in Pyongyang and international hotels in the North Korean capital, according to Ryom Kum Dan of 3G cellphone service provider Koryolink.

Cellphones rent for about $3.50 per day and SIM cards cost about $67, she said Monday. Satellite phones are prohibited, she said.

However, foreigners will not be able to communicate by mobile phone with local North Koreans, whose cellphones operate on a separate network, and they will not have access to the Internet using locally provided SIM cards. They can phone Japan and the United States, but not South Korea.

Cellphone use has multiplied in North Korea since Egyptian telecommunications firm Orascom built a 3G network in North Korea four years ago. More than a million people are using cellphones in the country, according to Orascom Telecom Media and Technology, which runs Koryolink as part of a joint venture with North Korea's telecommunications ministry called CHEO Technology JV Co.

The 3G network also provides North Koreans with access to the state-run Rodong Sinmun newspaper for a fee, but not to the global Internet.

On Friday, Koryolink saleswomen were setting up cellphone rental booths at Pyongyang's Sunan airport. One poster depicting a woman in a traditional Korean dress with a cellphone pressed to her ear read, "Here You Can Buy Koryolink Visitor Line."

During his recent four-day trip to North Korea, Schmidt urged North Korea to provide its people with better access to the global Internet. The Google executive chairman noted that it would be "very easy" for North Korea to offer Internet on the 3G cellphone network.

"As the world becomes increasingly connected, the North Korean decision to be virtually isolated is very much going to affect their physical world and their economic growth. It will make it harder for them to catch up economically," he wrote in a Google blog entry posted Sunday.

"It is their choice now, and in my view, it's time for them to start, or they will remain behind."

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Kim Kwang Hyon contributed to this report.

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