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Two Paths, Same Fate for Reporters Facing Prison

By [JESSE MCKINLEY](#)

SAN FRANCISCO — The roads that led two Current TV employees, [Laura Ling](#) and [Euna Lee](#), to be sentenced this week to a North Korean labor camp were in some regards as different as their lives here in California.

Ms. Ling, who grew up in a Sacramento suburb and has a well-known journalist sister, was earning a reputation at the San Francisco-based news channel as a fearless globe-trotting journalist. She reported stories in hotspots like Sri Lanka and Myanmar and witnessed the type of bloodshed such gritty work often entails.

Ms. Lee, on the other hand, moved as an adult to the United States from South Korea and usually worked in Los Angeles behind the scenes as an editor. She was taking her first trip on an overseas assignment for the company when she was arrested, according to a Current TV employee who spoke on the condition of anonymity because of the company's policy of not commenting on the situation.

The two women now face the same fate, having been sentenced Monday to 12 years of hard labor after a North Korean court found them guilty of illegally entering the country. The harsh sentences have prompted the Obama administration to call for the women's release on humanitarian grounds, but administration officials say the women may be used as a negotiating ploy by

[North Korea](#) in the continuing international fallout from the country's nuclear test two weeks ago.

The women's families have been mostly quiet since the sentencing, reportedly concerned that their comments could harden North Korean resolve or complicate the diplomatic efforts to win their release.

"I have trouble talking or thinking about this right now," Michael Saldate, Ms. Lee's husband, said in a brief telephone interview on Tuesday.

Current TV, a politics and youth-oriented news channel founded by former Vice President [Al Gore](#), has had no comment on the two journalists. Kalee Kreider, a spokeswoman for Mr. Gore, also declined to comment on the specifics of the situation, but said Mr. Gore had been in regular contact with the families of Ms. Ling and Ms. Lee.

The two women were working on a story on the China-North Korea border when they were detained in mid-March. Long before that, Ms. Ling, 32, had shown a proclivity for life in front of the camera — her older sister, Lisa Ling, is a successful television reporter — and had been an on-air correspondent for Current since 2005.

Ms. Lee, 36, moved to the United States from South Korea in the mid-1990s and had settled into a quiet, steady life of work and family; she and Mr. Saldate have a 4-year-old daughter. Mr. Saldate, a stand-up comic and actor, was the public performer in the couple; Ms. Lee's sole appearance on the Current TV Web site is a five-second clip of her holding up a can of soda. "Euna loves Dr Pepper," the clip is titled.

Ms. Ling grew up with her sister in Carmichael, Calif., where she excelled at school and, according to a friend, Marcus Marquez, charted an ambitious life. She graduated with a communications degree from the University of California, Los Angeles, in 1998.

"She was definitely always smiling, very smart, involved," Mr. Marquez said. "She really looked up to her sister."

Her onetime neighbors said Tuesday that they were incredulous that Ms. Ling and Ms. Lee could be involved in an international incident.

“They’re not spies, I know that for sure,” said Pat Hozack, 74, who lives next door to the modest two-story house where Ms. Ling grew up and her father still lives. “It all feels unreal.”

Ms. Ling had traveled extensively as a Current TV correspondent and is now vice president of the channel’s “vanguard journalism unit,” which she described as dedicated to investigating the “big issues really affecting our world” in a short promotional video.

“We’re trying to push the envelope here, and stay out in front of events,” she says, “rather than regurgitate news headlines.”

Sure enough, Ms. Ling had shown a taste for potentially dangerous assignments on topics like [marijuana](#) trafficking, child prostitution and slave labor.

A recent story about the [drug war](#) in Mexico had been especially challenging, including one video that showed Ms. Ling visibly shaken by a shooting.

“Oh, my God, oh, my God,” Ms. Ling says, looking at a body in a bullet-ridden car. “Did you see that?” Ms. Ling continued reporting, eventually delivering an hourlong segment.

In a June 1 interview on CNN’s [“Larry King Live,”](#) Ms. Ling’s husband, Iain Clayton, read a letter from his wife.

“I am so lonely, and scared,” Mr. Clayton read. “But baby, thinking of you gives me strength.”

On Tuesday, Mr. Saldate was still trying to make sense of his wife’s situation, even as he tended to their daughter, taking her to a doctor’s visit and school.

“Maybe in the future I’ll be able, but right now, I can’t really explain,” Mr. Saldate said of his feelings on the matter. “It’s just not something I can go into.”

