Google Chief Urges North Korea to embrace the Web

Mr. Schmidt, part of a private delegation led by former Gov. Bill Richardson of New Mexico that also sought to press North Korea on humanitarian and diplomatic issues, said North Korea risked falling further behind if it did not provide more access to cellphone service and the Internet.

"As the world becomes increasingly connected, their decision to be virtually isolated is very much going to affect their physical world, their economic growth and so forth and it will make it harder for them to catch up economically," he told reporters during a stop at Beijing International Airport. "We made that alternative very, very clear."

Their visit, the highest-profile delegation of Americans since Kim Jong-un took power upon the death of his father in December 2011, comes at a precarious time for United States-North Korean relations after the North’s rocket launch last month that drew international condemnation. North Korea insists its Unha-3 rocket is part of a peaceful space program; South Korean and American intelligence officials say the North was testing a long-range ballistic missile that could one day reach the United States.

The State Department was not thrilled with Mr. Richardson’s freelance diplomacy, at least not publicly. A spokeswoman described Mr. Richardson’s visit as not “particularly helpful” given that the United States is seeking to rally support for tougher international sanctions against the North. Some North Korea experts have characterized the self-described humanitarian mission as naive, saying it will ultimately serve the North’s propaganda needs.

Although Mr. Richardson did not address the criticism on Thursday, he said his hosts were receptive during discussions about ways to reduce tensions on the Korean peninsula as well as his effort to seek the release of a Korean-American who was detained in November in the north of the country.

"We had a very positive reaction," Mr. Richardson said.

The delegation did not meet with the detained American, Kenneth Bae, 44, a tour operator from Washington who has been accused of "hostile acts," but Mr. Richardson said he was assured Mr. Bae was being treated well and that judicial proceedings would begin soon.

There was one tangible success of their visit: the authorities, Mr. Richardson said, had agreed to deliver to Mr. Bae a letter from his son.

But Mr. Richardson’s efforts to promote peace, love and understanding were overshadowed by the billion-dollar wattage of Mr. Schmidt, a vocal proponent of Internet freedom. The delegation, which included Mr. Schmidt’s daughter and Jared Cohen, a former State Department official who heads Google Ideas, the company’s research arm, made highly choreographed visits to several sites meant to display the nation’s information technology prowess.

At the elite Kim Il Sung University, computer science students showed off their ability to surf the Internet, stopping on a Web site run by Cornell University.

For most North Koreans, using a computer, let alone accessing Google, is all but impossible. Although the country has global broadband infrastructure, few people are allowed to use it, and if they do, their surfing is strictly monitored. Experts say fewer than a thousand people have such access, most of them software developers, government officials and well-connected party loyalists.

At the main library in the North Korean capital, Pyongyang, the Grand People’s Study House, the Americans watched as users in thick winter coats crowded around computer screens that connect to North Korea’s Intranet, known as Kwangmyong, which serves up government-approved documents, books and archival newspapers.

They later toured the Korea Computer Center, an incubator for domestic software and hardware, where they played with a homegrown tablet and other gadgetry, most of it developed with help from Russia, China and India. A quote from Kim Jong Il, the current leader’s father, graced the room: "Now is the era for science and technology. It is the era of computers."

Since he came to power, the 20-something Mr. Kim, who was educated in a Swiss boarding school, has emphasized the importance of science and technology for economic development. And while he has called for computerizing in the nation’s dilapidated factories -- and spending even more scarce hard currency on developing ballistic missiles -- he has made no mention of addressing North Korea’s status as one of the world’s least wired nations.

Mr. Schmidt appears to have learned a great deal from his visit. Speaking to reporters in Beijing, he talked in some detail about the nation’s 3G cellular phone service, developed by the Egyptian telecom company Orascom. But he noted with disappointment that little more than one million of the country’s 24 million citizens had cellphones.

That system, he added hopefully, had the potential to provide Internet access but that so far the feature was unavailable. "It would be very easy for them to turn it on," he said.