

BBC JOURNALIST FACES FIVE YEARS JAIL FOR THAILAND REPORTING

BANGKOK: A British journalist with the BBC faces up to five years in a Thai jail after a lawyer brought a criminal defamation case against him over an investigation into fraud on a popular tourist island. Rights groups say the case exposes how Thailand's defamation and computer crime laws scupper investigative journalism and make it difficult to expose wrongdoing in an endemically corrupt country. The prosecution was sparked by a 2015 report by

Jonathan Head, the BBC's Southeast Asia correspondent, looking at how two foreign retirees were scammed out of their properties in Phuket.

Head appeared in a Phuket court yesterday alongside one of the victims, British national Ian Rance who is a joint defendant in the prosecution. Both pleaded not guilty.

The man bringing the prosecution is Pratuan Thanarak, a Phuket lawyer who featured in the BBC's report looking at how

Rance lost lucrative properties. Rance retired to Phuket in 2001, married a local woman with whom he had three children and bought some \$1.2 million worth of properties. Under Thai law foreigners cannot own land. But many get around that by placing properties in the name of a company they own or with locals they trust.

In 2010 Rance discovered his wife forged his signature to remove him as director and sell the properties with the

help of a network of money lenders and property agents on the island. She was jailed for four years over the scam and he has fought through the courts for years to get the properties back. The BBC's Head reported that Pratuan, the lawyer, admitted to notarizing Rance's signature without him being present. Pratuan filed a defamation case alleging the reports caused him to be "defamed, insulted or hated", according to a copy of the complaint seen by AFP.—AFP

HONG KONG SNOWDEN REFUGEES SOUGHT BY SRI LANKA AGENTS

HONG KONG: Sri Lankan refugees who sheltered fugitive whistleblower Edward Snowden in Hong Kong have been targeted by agents from their home country, a lawyer and legislators said yesterday. The story of how impoverished refugees helped the former National Security Agency contractor, who initiated one of the largest data leaks in US history, evades authorities in 2013 only emerged in September, propelling them into the media spotlight. Snowden's former hosts Supun Thilina Kellapatha and ex-soldier Ajith Pushpakumara from Sri Lanka told reporters Thursday they were "scared and nervous" about the agents' activities in Hong Kong.

"I don't feel stable... I don't have a normal life now," said Supun, a target of politically motivated violence according to his protection claim. Accompanying the asylum seekers, their lawyer Robert Tibbo and pro-democracy lawmakers James To and Charles Mok believe Sri Lankan agents have targeted the pair. In an incident which tipped Tibbo off, another asylum seeker from Sri Lanka was allegedly approached by two agents identifying themselves as officers from Sri Lanka's Criminal Investigation Department (CID), which has previously been accused of kidnapping and torture.

The agents, who were carrying files containing information and photographs about Snowden's temporary hosts, asked for specific details about them, Tibbo said. The asylum seekers' families in Sri Lanka were also harassed and threatened by police, military and government officials about their exact whereabouts and telephone numbers, with "clear intentions to locate" them, said Tibbo. "There's actually a treaty between the Hong Kong government and the Sri Lankan government for extradition... All they would have to do is make the formal request to the government, and they've never done that," Tibbo said.

Years in limbo

"It's quite clear that the Sri Lankan government has an interest in our clients' relationship with Snowden." But Sri Lankan authorities have denied this claim. "The police have no interest in the two individuals or their families," a senior police source told AFP in Colombo. "The Sri Lankan police does not have the time or the resources to send people to Hong Kong as alleged." Tibbo said they notified the city's immigration department and would soon report it to the police. Neither immediately responded to AFP's request for comment.

Lawmakers To and Mok also said they would urge the Hong Kong government and the police to offer protection to the asylum seekers and ensure their safety. The city's 11,000 marginalized refugees spend years in limbo, hoping the government will support their asylum claims. But with less than one percent of cases successfully substantiated by city authorities, most refugees live in fear of deportation. The Sri Lankan families want to go to Canada, which has a track record of taking in refugees. "I think the world owes them quite a heavy debt for (their help to) advance the cause of people who are concerned about surveillance and privacy violations by governments," Charles Mok said.—AFP



KUALA LUMPUR: United Malays National Organization (UMNO) Youth activists pose with placards during a protest outside the North Korean Embassy in Kuala Lumpur yesterday.—AFP

N KOREA LASHES MALAYSIA OVER KIM ASSASSINATION

MALAYSIA ACCUSED OF CONSPIRING WITH S KOREA

SEOUL: North Korea's state media broke a 10-day silence yesterday on the murder of Kim Jong-Un's half brother, launching a ferocious assault on Malaysia for "immoral" handling of the case and for playing politics with the corpse. In its first comments on the airport assassination of Kim Jong-Nam, KCNA said Malaysia bore responsibility for the death, and accused it of conspiring with South Korea. "Malaysia is obliged to hand his body to the DPRK (North Korea) side as it made an autopsy and forensic examination of it in an illegal and immoral manner", the North's Korean Jurists Committee said, in comments carried by the state-run news agency.

Malaysia has not released the corpse "under the absurd pretext" that it needs a DNA sample from the dead man's family, it said. "This proves that the Malaysian side is going to politicize the transfer of the body in utter disregard of international law and morality and thus attain a sinister purpose," it said. Throughout its lengthy dispatch, KCNA avoided any reference to the dead man's identity, calling him only "a citizen of the DPRK bearing a diplomatic passport". North Korea has never acknowledged him as the estranged brother of its leader. Leaked CCTV footage from the

brazen attack last Monday shows the portly Kim being approached by two women who appear to put something in his face. Moments later he is seen asking for help from airport staff, who direct him to a clinic. Malaysian police said he suffered a seizure and died before he reached hospital. An autopsy has ruled out heart failure, with investigators focusing on the theory that a toxin was applied to his face, in what South Korea has insisted was a targeted assassination.

Malaysian detectives are holding three people—women from Indonesia and Vietnam, and a North Korean man—but want to speak to seven others, including diplomat Hyon Kwang Song. But Malaysia's top policeman acknowledged yesterday that unless Hyon, second secretary at the North Korean mission, volunteers himself, they will be unable to speak to him. "We will adhere to the rules of immunity," Khalid Abu Bakar said. "We cannot go inside the embassy." Malaysian police think four North Korean suspects may have fled to Pyongyang immediately after the killing.

Wild rumors

A small group of protesters descended on North Korea's embassy yesterday, with

many carrying signs reading "Respect Malaysia". Demonstrators from the youth wing of Malaysia's ruling party handed in a letter to diplomats denouncing Pyongyang's "impermissible attitude and rudeness" and urging the North "to reconsider its aggressive approach". It was reported yesterday South Korea is using giant loudspeakers to blast news of the dramatic assassination across the border with its reclusive northern neighbor.

Seoul employed its banks of high-decibel loudspeakers to ensure details of the death of Jong-Nam, once believed to be the North's likely heir, reverberated through the border area, Seoul's MBC TV station said. "Kim Jong-Nam... died after being attacked by two unidentified women at the Kuala Lumpur International Airport in Malaysia," blared the message. News of the outside world is heavily restricted and censored in the North under the Kim family, which has ruled for decades with an iron fist and pervasive personality cult.

Seoul's Foreign Minister Yun Byung-Se said Wednesday in London the assassination by the North, if confirmed, would constitute a "serious breach" of international order and would be regarded as a "state-led act of terrorism".—AFP