



SEPANG: North Korean national Ri Jong Chol, centre, is escorted with a heavy police presence as he leaves the Sepang police headquarters in Sepang yesterday. —AFP

FRUSTRATED MALAYSIAN POLICE RELEASE NORTH KOREAN SUSPECT

SUSPECT WAS INVOLVED IN ILLICIT ACTIVITIES

KUALA LUMPUR: Malaysia issued an arrest warrant for a North Korean airline employee yesterday over the assassination of the half-brother of Pyongyang's leader, after frustrated police had to release their only other suspect from the isolated nation. Ri Jong-Chol is among eight North Koreans suspected of involvement in the dramatic killing of Kim Jong-Nam, the half-brother of the reclusive nation's leader, who was poisoned with a banned nerve agent at Kuala Lumpur International Airport. Malaysia's attorney general has announced there was insufficient evidence to charge 47-year-old Ri.

"The deportation will take place tonight. He will be escorted by two North Korean officials to Beijing and from Beijing to Pyongyang," deputy prime minister Ahmad Zahid Hamidi told reporters. "The police probe showed he was not working as stated in his documents but was involved in illicit activities detrimental to our security." As he was led out of a police station outside the capital under tight security and handed over to immigration authorities, police chief Khalid Abu Bakar said he regretted the release.

"We believe that Ri Jong Chol played a part in Kim Chol's murder but unfortunately we lack evidence to charge him," he said, using the name given in the passport carried by Kim Jong-Nam. "We are frustrated because of a lack of evidence," he said via text message from Saudi Arabia where he is on a religious pilgrimage. However, he denied political or diplomatic pressure

had been a factor in the release, saying it was purely an investigative issue.

A senior police official who asked not to be named told AFP that Ri had been handed over to immigration authorities in the administrative capital of Putrajaya. "I do not know when he will be deported as they will need to sort out the travel documents," he said. Ri's release came two days after two women—one Vietnamese and one Indonesian—were charged with murdering Kim. Seven other North Koreans are wanted in connection with the killing.

Arrest warrants

Yesterday police issued an arrest warrant for a North Korean airline employee, Kim Uk Il, 37, in connection with the murder. They also requested that Hyon Kwang Song, second secretary at the North Korean embassy, assist the probe. Both are believed to be in Malaysia. Four others are thought to have fled to Pyongyang on the day of the murder. Ri was arrested days after Kim suffered an agonizing death when he was attacked as he waited to board a flight to Macau.

CCTV footage shows two women approaching the heavyset 45-year-old and apparently smearing his face with a cloth. Police say he suffered a seizure and died less than 20 minutes later. Swabs of the dead man's face revealed traces of VX, a synthetic chemical so deadly that it is classed as a weapon of mass destruction. Indonesian Siti Aisyah, 25, and Doan Thi Huong, 28, from Vietnam, face the death penalty if found guilty. Both women say they

thought they were merely taking part in a prank video.

South Korea has pointed the finger of blame at North Korea, citing what they say was a standing order from leader Kim Jong-Un to kill his exiled half-brother who may have been seen as a potential rival. North Korea, which has not acknowledged the dead man's identity, has vehemently protested the investigation, saying Malaysia is in cahoots with its enemies. In response, Malaysia has cancelled a visa-free travel deal with North Korea—a key conduit to the outside world—and recalled its envoy to Pyongyang.

The facts remain

On Thursday a senior North Korean diplomat leading a delegation to Kuala Lumpur reiterated Pyongyang's assertion that Kim had died of a heart attack, dismissing the use of a nerve agent, and urged Malaysia to release his body. Police chief Khalid quashed the claims. "Our investigations supported by expert reports confirmed that Kim was murdered. North Korea can say what they like but the facts remain," he told national news agency Bernama.

Malaysia yesterday also stepped up its criticism of the use of the banned nerve agent, condemning "the use of such a chemical weapon by anyone, anywhere and under any circumstances". "Its use at a public place could have endangered the general public," the foreign ministry said, adding that the Hague-based Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons was helping it investigate. —AFP

HUNDREDS MARCH AS SHOOTING OF BOY SHOCKS THAI SOUTH

BANGKOK: More than 1,000 people marched in Thailand's insurgency-torn south yesterday to condemn the killing of a Buddhist family, including an eight-year-old boy, as a sudden spike in violence undercuts progress in peace talks. The under-reported rebellion waged by Malay Muslim insurgents against the Buddhist-majority Thai state has killed more than 6,800 people, mostly civilians, since it erupted 13 years ago. That toll rose Thursday after suspected militants ambushed the car of a deputy village headman, shooting him dead along with his eight-year-old son, wife and sister-in-law.

The family was driving to school on a remote road in the Ruso district of Narathiwat province when the gunmen attacked. The ambush provoked outrage from religious leaders and civil society groups from both the Muslim and Buddhist communities, who came together for yesterday's march through Ruso. Dozens of local school children also joined the demonstration, carrying a banner that said "stop the shooting, stop the killing". "The aim of the rally is to denounce the killing of innocent people," Colonel Ruangsak Buadaeng, a local police commander, said.

Thursday also saw a 44-year-old Muslim leader killed in a drive-by shooting and three plainclothes soldiers gunned down in front of stunned shoppers at a night market in Pattani province. The insurgents, who operate in tight and secretive cells, rarely claim their attacks. Shootings are frequent but it is often hard to work out whether they are related to the rebellion, criminal activity or personal disputes in the region.

Safety zone

But Thursday's wave of violence appeared timed to undermine recent gains made in peace talks between the army and the Mara Patani—an umbrella group claiming to represent the insurgents. The Thai army and the Mara Patani this week agreed to create a limited "safety zone" in the region, as a trust building measure. The deal, tantamount to a highly localized ceasefire, was a small but rare step forward in years of stuttering talks. But analysts say the Mara do not represent the most active armed militant faction and have played down the significance of the "safety zone" announcement. —AFP



NARATHIWAT: Children hold a banner that reads, stop the killing, stop the shooting during a march for peace in Thailand's restive southern province of Narathiwat yesterday. —AFP

PHILIPPINES' DUTERTE WILL PAY PRICE FOR DRUGS KILLINGS

MANILA: A senator and detained critic of Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte's war on drugs has warned he and his "blind followers" will pay for ignoring alleged extrajudicial killings, and should stop trying to fool the world their crackdown was above board. Leila de Lima, who last year led a Senate probe into alleged summary killings during Duterte's anti-drugs campaign, was arrested last week and has been remanded in police detention on drug charges.

"In due time, your president and those who blindly enforce his illegal orders to kill, fabricate evidence and concoct lies will be held accountable," De Lima said in a handwritten note posted on her official Facebook page yesterday. The senator was responding to rebuttals by the president's office and the police of a report by Human Rights Watch, which on Thursday challenged official accounts that thousands of killings during police operations were in self-defense, and that due process had been followed. —Reuters