



PYONGYANG: Korean People's Army (KPA) soldiers walk before the portraits of late North Korean leaders Kim Il-Sung, left, and Kim Jong-Il, right, following the opening ceremony for the Ryomyong Street housing development in Pyongyang yesterday.—AFP

KIM ASSASSINATION SUSPECTS AT THE RISK OF BEING AMBUSHED

KUALA LUMPUR: Two women accused of assassinating the half-brother of North Korea's leader risk being subjected to a "trial by ambush", a defense lawyer said yesterday, accusing the police of failing to share key evidence. Indonesian Siti Aisyah, 25, and Doan Thi Huong, 28, from Vietnam, were taken in bulletproof vests to a heavily guarded magistrate's court for a hearing ahead of a murder trial that could see them hanged.

Police accuse the pair of wiping the banned nerve agent VX on Kim Jong-Nam's face at Kuala Lumpur International Airport on February 13 as he was about to board a flight to Macau, where he was living in exile. Rival South Korea accuses the North of masterminding the killing of Kim, the estranged half-brother of North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un. Pyongyang denies the accusation, insisting he died of a heart attack.

Siti's lawyer told the court they had not been provided with a report from the police and prosecution on statements taken from three North Koreans who were allowed to leave Malaysia under a deal that defused a diplomatic crisis between the two nations. "The duty of the investigation officer is not to merely bolster up the case for the prosecution so as to secure a conviction but to establish the unvarnished truth of the case so that the justice may prevail," Gooi Soon Seng said.

Gooi also sought the court's intervention in making any CCTV footage in relation to the murder available to the defense to ensure both sides have equal access to evidence. "There shall be no trial by ambush," he said. Doan's lawyer asked the court to alter the murder charge since prosecutors have not identified four people mentioned in charge documents as accomplices to the women, but the judge did not entertain the request.

'She was cheated'

About 100 police officers include commandos in balaclavas and carrying assault rifles, guarded the court compound during the women's appearance. Dressed in a red top and blue jeans, Siti kept her head down throughout the hearing. Doan, also casually dressed, quietly observed the court proceedings. The case is due to be transferred to an upper court where the women will be tried for murder. If convicted, they could face the death penalty, which is carried out by hanging in Malaysia.

The killing sparked a diplomatic row between Malaysia and North Korea which saw both countries banning each other's citizens from leaving and withdrawing their ambassadors. The travel ban was lifted in late March after a deal was struck involving the return of Kim's body to North Korea. Police are still looking for four North Korean men who are suspected to have taken part in the murder plot, but are believed to have returned to Pyongyang.

Three other North Koreans earlier described as "persons of interest", including a diplomat based in Malaysia, were allowed to return home under the deal. Indonesian officials have maintained that Siti was duped into believing she was taking part in pranks for a TV show, while Doan's family said she was invited to Malaysia to be an actress. Tran Huy Hoang, a young Vietnamese man who attended the hearing and described himself as a cousin of Doan, said: "She loves to travel and party but she never do anything violent. "All of us believe she was cheated."—AFP



SEPAANG: Malaysian policemen keep watch during the court appearance of Indonesian national Siti Aisyah and Vietnamese national Doan Thi Huong at the magistrates' court in Sepang yesterday.—AFP

JAPAN PM: NORTH KOREA MAY BE CAPABLE OF SARIN-LOADED MISSILES

CONCERN MOUNTS OVER IMMINENT NUCLEAR TEST

TOKYO: Prime Minister Shinzo Abe warned yesterday that North Korea may be capable of firing a missile loaded with sarin nerve gas toward Japan, as international concern mounted that a missile or nuclear test by the authoritarian state could be imminent. "There is a possibility that North Korea is already capable of shooting missiles with sarin as warheads," Abe told a parliamentary panel on national security and diplomacy. Abe was responding to a question about Japan's readiness at a time of increased regional tension.

A US navy aircraft carrier is heading toward the Korean Peninsula as Pyongyang prepares for the 105th anniversary of the birth of its founder Kim Il Sung this weekend. Citing Syria

where dozens of people died recently in an alleged sarin nerve gas attack, Abe said Japan should take the example seriously, stressing the need to strengthen its deterrence against the North.

North Korea, which is not a signatory to the international Chemical Weapons Convention, has been producing chemical weapons since the 1980s and is now estimated to have as many as 5,000 tons, according to a South Korean defense white paper. Its stockpile reportedly has 25 types of agents, including sarin.

Experts say if North Korea were to attack South Korea, it would likely target Seoul's defenses with chemical and biological weapons dropped from aircraft or delivered via missiles,

artillery and grenades. Japan, under its postwar constitution, has limited the role of its military to self-defense only and relied on the US for offensive and nuclear capability. But recently, Abe's ruling party has proposed that Japan should bolster its missile defense, including upgrading the capability to shoot down an enemy missile and acquiring the capacity to attack the base it was fired from.

With President Donald Trump's administration not ruling out a military option to dealing with North Korea, "tension is certainly rising," Abe said Wednesday to a group of lawmakers from his ruling party who sought increased safety measures for Japanese nationals in case of an emergency.—AFP

JAPAN SCRAMBLES RECORD NUMBER OF MILITARY JETS

TOKYO: Japan's military scrambled a record number of jets last year mostly in response to an increase in approaching Chinese aircraft, the government said yesterday. Tokyo ordered its jets to the skies 1,168 times in the fiscal year through March, the defense ministry said, with 73 percent of the missions against aircraft either known to be or believed to originate from China.

"Activities of Chinese jets are on the rise in terms of their frequency, area, and duration," said Admiral Katsutoshi Kawano, head of Japan's Joint Chiefs of Staff. "Considering the modernizing trend of the Chinese military, we expect this to continue," he told a press conference. The total number of scrambles marked an increase of 295 from the year

before, the ministry said, noting that none of the cases resulted in violations of Japan's airspace.

Japan and China are at odds over a set of uninhabited islands in the East China Sea that sit in rich fishing grounds. The islands, known as the Senkakus in Japan and the Diaoyus in China, are a running sore in Tokyo's relations with Beijing. Japan has administrative control of the islets but China claims they have been part of its territory for centuries. The two countries have clashed diplomatically over their ownership, with both sides sending ships and aircraft to nearby waters to assert their claims. Japanese officials believe China has been trying to analyze the capacity and response patterns of Japan's defense and coastguard personnel.—AFP