

International

Kim Jong Un sister promoted to top decision-making body

Kim Yo Jong named as alternate in politburo

SEOUL: The promotion of North Korean leader Kim Jong Un's 28-year-old sister to the country's top decision-making body is a sign he is strengthening his position by drawing his most important people closer to the centre of power, experts and officials say. Kim Yo Jong was named as an alternate member of the politburo within the ruling Workers' Party of Korea - the opaque, all-powerful party organ where top state affairs are decided, the North's official media said on Sunday.

It makes her only the second woman in patriarchal North Korea to join the exclusive club after Kim Kyong Hui, who held powerful roles when her brother Kim Jong Il ruled the country. "Since she is a female, Kim Jong Un likely does not see her as a threat and a challenge to his leadership," said Moon Hong-sik, research fellow at the Institute for National Security Strategy. "As the saying goes 'blood is thicker than water,' Kim Jong Un thinks Kim Yo Jong can be trusted."

Unlike her aunt, who was promoted to the politburo in 2012 after serving more than three decades in the party, Kim Yo Jong has risen to power at an unprecedented pace. Kim Kyong Hui has not been seen since her husband, Jang Song Thaek, once regarded as the No 2 leader in Pyongyang, was executed in 2013. South Korea's spy agency believes she is now in a secluded place near Pyongyang undergoing a treatment for an unidentified disease, according to an August briefing to parliament.

Jang and his wife are not the only relatives to fall from Kim Jong Un's favor. Kim Jong Un's estranged half-brother, Kim Jong Nam, was killed with a toxic nerve agent at a Malaysian airport in February. Two women are on trial for the murder, which South Korean

and US officials believe Kim Jong Un's regime was behind. Kim Jong Nam, who lived in exile in Macau, had criticized his family's dynastic rule and his brother had issued a standing order for his execution, according to some South Korean lawmakers.

Ponytail, black suits

The smartly dressed Kim Yo Jong, her hair usually pulled back in a ponytail and mostly seen in black suits and black-heeled shoes, made her first debut on state media in December 2011, seen standing tearfully next to Kim Jong Un at the funeral of their father. Since then, Kim has made several appearances with her brother, giggling at concerts, riding a white horse, smiling as she receives flowers on his behalf at state functions.

Her youth and bubbly personality seen in state media are in stark contrast to the usually glum generals and ageing party cadres who follow Kim Jong Un on official duties. Having previously only occasionally appeared in the background, the young heiress has moved to the front and centre of media photos more recently, assisting her brother at numerous high-profile state events. At a massive military parade in April to mark the 105th birth anniversary of founding father Kim Il Sung, she was seen rushing out from behind pillars to bring paperwork to her brother as he prepared to give an address.

The same month, she stood alongside him during the unveiling ceremony of a construction project in Pyongyang. In March 2016, she accompanied Kim Jong Un to a field guidance for nuclear scientists, where he claimed successful miniaturization of nuclear warheads. "Kim Yo Jong's official inclusion in the 30-strong exclu-



PYONGYANG: North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un (center) attends the Second Plenum of the 7th Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK) in Pyongyang. —AFP

sive club of North Korea's chief policy makers means her role within the regime will be expanded further," Cheong Seong-chang, senior fellow at the Sejong Institute south of Seoul.

Behind the veil

Apart from her age, little is known about Kim Yo Jong. She was publicly identified for the first time in February 2011 when a South Korean TV station caught

her at an Eric Clapton concert in Singapore with her other brother, Kim Jong Chol. The three, who all reportedly went to school in Switzerland, are full blood siblings, born to Kim Jong Il's fourth partner, Ko Yong Hui. Kim Jong Chol, the oldest of Kim Jong Il's sons, does not involve himself in politics, leading a quiet life in Pyongyang where he plays guitar in a band, according to Thae Yong Ho, North Korea's former deputy ambassador in London who defected to the South. —Reuters



Little known about the UN-blacklisted Clapton's fan

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Transgender couple finds acceptance in rural Nepal

DADELHDHURA: Born and raised as a boy in rural Nepal, Monika Shahi Nath never dreamed that one day she would be a bride, adored and accepted as a wife and daughter-in-law. But the 40-year-old has made history, becoming Nepal's first transgender person to be issued with a marriage certificate by district officials, even though the country has no formal laws for such unions.

Nath, who married 22-year-old Ramesh Nath Yogi in May, initially feared that her in-laws would not welcome her—a transgender woman—into their family but the couple have found rare acceptance in Nepal. Many transgender people in the country still struggle to be open about their identity despite progressive laws that include a third gender option on identity cards and passports.

"We are happy and feel accepted as husband and wife," said Nath, who was the first Nepali to get a passport with the 'O' for 'other' gender designation in 2015. "I never dreamed that one day I would be someone's wife, that I would be loved as a daughter-in-law," she said. Nath grew up in a remote village in western Nepal as a boy called Manoj, and said she always felt different. "At school, I wanted to sit with the girls and was fascinated with women's clothing," she said.

In her early twenties she started experimenting with dressing as a woman, stealing her sister's clothes and running away for days at a time to the closest city. "Away



DADELHDHURA, Nepal: Nepali transgender person Monika Shahi Nath Yogi and her husband Ramesh Nath Yogi ride a motorbike in Kain Pani village in Nepal's Dadeldhura district. — AFP

from my home, I would secretly become a woman. It would make me very happy, but I was afraid to tell my family, I felt I would shame them," she said. Despite her work as an activist, Nath's new identity was not talked about within her family. When she came home with her new husband, wearing a short red dress and a wedding ring, it was one of her first visits as a woman. "But my marriage has made it easier. They truly see me as a woman now," she said.

Yogi's family—who live in a village a six hour drive away—was also initially resistant to the marriage, but the community has now accepted the couple. "Her relationship with the family and with the people in the community is very good. We think it is okay," said neighbor Laxmi Nath

Bista. "The idea of third gender is very new to people around here, many people don't understand what it means. But her behavior is good with everyone, so they are accepting of her."

Despite the changes, some activists say members of the LGBTI community continue to live in the shadows of society. A bill to legalize same-sex marriage was proposed two years ago, but has not progressed, and it is not clear what legal standing Nath's marriage has. The couple could also face allegations of polygamy—which is illegal in Nepal, though not uncommon—as Yogi was already married with two children. Nath said: "I am blessed to be someone's wife, but the government needs to make the legal changes so people can easily marry the person they love." —AFP

Philippine president popularity dips

MANILA: Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte has suffered his first major drop in popularity, an independent pollster found, after the deaths of two Manila teenagers in his controversial anti-crime crackdown triggered mass protests. The decline in support shown by the Social Weather Stations survey—down to 67 percent from 78 percent in June who said they were "satisfied" with Duterte's performance as president—came amid growing public outrage over drug war killings in the Philippines. Duterte assumed office in June last year vowing to eradicate illegal drugs in society by killing up to 100,000 traffickers and addicts. In the 15 months since he came to power police have reported killing more 3,850 people in anti-drug operations.

Thousands of other people have been murdered in unexplained circumstances that rights groups partly attribute to vigilante death squads. Although Duterte's drug war remains largely popular among a citizenry fed up with high crime, growing unease with the killings resulted in August and September in large street protests over the deaths of two Manila teenagers. The Manila-based pollster, which has been

regularly running the quarterly surveys since 1986, did not explain the drop shown in Sunday's figures.

But analysts told AFP it was likely linked to growing public concern over the drug war killings. "It may likely reflect growing concerns over the direction of (the) war on drugs, particularly the death of minors and discipline within ranks of the law enforcement agencies," political analyst Richard Heydarian said. State prosecutors are studying the possible filing of murder charges against four anti-drugs officers over the August 16 shooting death of Manila student Kian delos Santos, 17.

Several other officers are under investigation after they killed alleged robbery suspect Carl Angelo Arnaiz, 19, the following night. His neighbor Reynaldo de Guzman, 14, was later found murdered by unknown suspects in the northern Philippines. "It's the first significant slide since the president was inaugurated," said Victor Andres Manhit, chief executive of Manila-based political consultancy Stratbase ADR Institute, of the survey.

Duterte's aides largely shrugged off the new numbers. "The love is still there," Duterte spokesman Ernesto Abella told reporters, adding the poll numbers were consistent with the pattern of previous Filipino presidents who saw dips in their popularity after their first year in office. Heydarian, who has recently published a book titled "Rise of Duterte", said the lower poll numbers still left the president with "relatively high approval ratings and enough momentum" to pursue his political agenda. —AFP

Newly-retired 'living goddess' begins school

KATHMANDU: Matina Shakya was only three when she was taken away from her parents to be worshipped as a "living goddess" in Nepal's historic capital. Yesterday she finally started school after puberty ended her nine-year reign. Dressed in a green uniform and stripped of the heavy make-up she used to wear, Shakya, 12, looked like any other student as she walked into the Green Peace Co-ed School in Kathmandu. Fellow students and teachers had gathered outside to welcome her, playing music and waving flags—a small reminder of the huge crowds she used to draw as Kathmandu's Kumari, or living goddess.

"We are excited to have her with us, and we are discussing how to ease her and help her adjust in the new environment," said the principal Pema Yonjan. The Kumari is a pre-pubescent girl who lives in a temple palace in the heart of Kathmandu as part of a centuries-old tradition and is considered the embodiment of the Hindu goddess Taleju. She only leaves the temple 13 times a year on special feast days, when huge crowds of wor-

shippers gather to see her. That means the Kumaris cannot attend school, and most have struggled to reintegrate into society after they retire.

But Shakya received private tuition following a 2008 Supreme Court ruling that the living goddesses should be educated. Her father Pratap Man Shakya said she had attended nursery at the school and he was confident she would be able to adapt to her new life. "We hope now that she is going to school in a good environment she will become an even better student," he said. Shakya was anointed as the Kumari in 2008, leaving her home to be cared for by specially-appointed guardians, and only retired last month as she neared puberty.

The tradition of the Kumari, originating from a word meaning princess in Sanskrit, comes from the Newar community indigenous to the Kathmandu Valley. It blends elements of Hinduism and Buddhism and the most important Kumaris represent each of the three former royal kingdoms of the valley: Kathmandu, Patan and Bhaktapur. The tradition was once closely linked to the royal family, but has continued despite the end of Nepal's Hindu monarchy in 2008. It has drawn criticism from child rights activists who say the Kumaris are denied a childhood and their isolation from society hinders their education and development. Shakya was replaced by three-year-old Trishna Shakya last month. —AFP

News in brief

Pesticide kills 20 farmers

MUMBAI: Twenty Indian farmers have died and hundreds of others are in hospital after inhaling poisonous pesticides while spraying crops, officials said yesterday, highlighting lax safety standards in the country. The farmers in the western state of Maharashtra, one of India's most important agricultural regions, died after using the dangerous pesticides without wearing protective gear. "Twenty farmers are dead and hundreds are undergoing medical treatment. Fifty are critical with damage to their eyesight," Kishore Tewari, the spokesman for a state government task force that helps farmers in distress said. The first death was reported in August and the number of fatalities increased throughout September, according to local news reports. They occurred in the Yavatmal region, around 670 kilometers from the financial capital Mumbai. Activists blame a lack of regulations covering pesticides and a failure to provide poor farmers with proper safety equipment.

India bans firecrackers

NEW DELHI: India's top court yesterday temporarily banned the sale of firecrackers in and around the capital ahead of Diwali, the Hindu festival of lights, as it looks to prevent a repeat of severe air pollution that forced school closures last year. New Delhi's air quality has already hit "very unhealthy" levels, US embassy data shows. This is often blamed on burning of unwanted vegetation on farms in neighboring states usual at this time of year, worsened by fumes from fireworks. The ban takes effect immediately and will run until Nov 1, said a panel of Supreme Court judges headed by Justice Arjan Kumar Sikri, adding that its impact on the region's air quality would have to be examined after the festival. "All temporary licenses to sell firecrackers stand cancelled," said Haripriya Padmanabhan, a lawyer representing the group that sought the ban. "People who had already purchased crackers will be able to burst them. Hopefully they won't do that," she told Asian News International, a partner of Reuters Television.

Militant leader killed

SRINAGAR: Indian forces said they shot dead a top leader of the Kashmir militant group Jaish-e-Mohammad in a clash in the disputed territory yesterday. The Pakistani national known only as Khalid was trapped in a house after throwing a grenade at a police checkpoint in the northern village of Ladoora. Khalid has been accused of organizing a string of suicide attacks across Indian-administered Kashmir, which Pakistan also claims. "He was one of the most wanted militants and the chief operational commander of JeM," Kashmir inspector-general of police, Muneer Ahmed Khan said. "He threw a grenade at the checkpoint which failed to explode. He then fired a pistol and took refuge in a nearby house where he was killed." Police said Khalid had planned suicide attacks in Muslim-majority Kashmir, including one on a paramilitary camp near Srinagar airport on October 3 in which one soldier and three attackers were killed.

11 Muslims sentenced

AHMEDABAD: An Indian court yesterday commuted the death sentences of 11 men convicted of causing a 2002 train fire that sparked anti-Muslim riots in which more than 1,000 people were killed. The 11 men, all Muslims, will instead face life in jail for causing the fire that killed 59 Hindu passengers and set off some of the worst religious violence to hit independent India. They were among 31 men convicted in 2011 who lodged an appeal at the High Court in the western state of Gujarat, where the violence occurred. "The court has commuted the death sentences for 11 convicted to life imprisonment," public prosecutor Eknath Ahuja said after the appeal hearing.