

Man sentenced for placing knives on Japan prince's desk



Prince Hisahito is second in line to the throne, after his father, the brother of Emperor Naruhito

Tokyo

A Japanese man who left two kitchen knives on the school desk of Japan's Prince Hisahito, who is second in line to the throne, was given a suspended sentence on Friday.

The man was handed an 18-month sentence, suspended for four years, a Tokyo district court spokesman told AFP.

Kaoru Hasegawa was arrested in April on suspicion of illegally entering the premises of the junior high school that the prince attends.

He was also accused of violating Japan's firearms law.

The prince was not at school when the knives were apparently placed on his desk. They were later found by school officials.

Hisahito, 13, is the son of Emperor Naruhito's younger brother Akishino, who is first in line to the throne.

The presiding judge said Friday that Hasegawa "carried out the crime because of selfish thoughts that he wanted to get attention," according to public broadcaster NHK.

"There's no room for leniency," the judge said.

The incident came as authorities were beefing up security ahead of the abdication of the popular former emperor Akihito after a 30-year reign.

Threats to the imperial family are relatively rare. In 1975, Akihito was almost hit by a Molotov cocktail in Okinawa, a major World War II battlefield where there was strong anti-emperor sentiment.

Japan's Chrysanthemum Throne can only be inherited by a male heir, according to the Imperial Household Law, in place since 1947. That has raised the prospect of a succession crisis if Hisahito does not have a son.

Erupting Indonesian volcano spews ash, lava



Indonesia's Mount Merapi, one of the world's most active volcanoes, erupted Thursday as fiery red molten lava streamed down from the crater and it belched clouds of grey ash 2,000 metres (6,500 feet) into the sky.

Mother 'reunites' with dead daughter in VR show

Seoul

A tearful reunion between a mother and her dead daughter via advanced virtual reality for a South Korean television has become an online hit, triggering fierce debate about voyeurism and exploitation.

The footage began with the girl -- who died of leukaemia in 2016 -- emerging from behind a pile of wood in a park, as if playing hide-and-seek.



But in the real world, Jang was standing in front of a studio green screen, wearing a virtual reality headset and touch-sensitive gloves

"Mum, where have you been?" she asks. "I've missed you a lot. Have you missed me?" Tears streaming down her face, Jang Ji-sung reached out towards her, wracked with emotion.

"I have missed you Na-yeon," she told the computer-generated six-year-old, her hands moving to stroke her hair. But in the real world, Jang was standing in front of a studio green screen, wearing a virtual reality headset and touch-sensitive gloves, her daughter's ashes in a locket around her neck.

At times the camera cut to Jang's watching husband and their three surviving children, wiping away tears of their own.

A nine-minute clip of the Munhwa Broadcasting Corporation (MBC) documentary "I met you" has been watched more than 13 million times in a week on Youtube.

Many viewers offered Jang their sympathy and support for the concept.

"My mother unexpectedly



Jang Ji-sung (L) 'met' her dead daughter Na-yeon via virtual reality for a South Korean TV show



Jang Ji-sung (L) 'met' her dead daughter Na-yeon via virtual reality for a South Korean TV show

passed away two years ago and I wish I could meet her through virtual reality," said one.

But media columnist Park Sang-hyun said the documentary amounted to exploitation of personal pain.

"It's understandable a grief-stricken mother would wish to meet her late daughter. I would do the same," he said. "The problem lies in that the broadcaster has taken advantage of a vulnerable mother who lost a child for sake of the viewer ratings."

"If the mother had been counselled before the filming," he added, "I wonder what kind of a psychiatrist would approve this."

- 'Happy birthday' - It took eight months of filming and programming to create the virtual Na-yeon, but the makers of the documentary insisted the broadcast was in-

tended to "console the family" rather than promote virtual reality in ultra-wired South Korea.

The technology presented a "new way to keep loved ones in memory", one of the producers told reporters.

Jang herself -- who has her daughter's name and date of birth tattooed on her arm in memory -- hoped the programme could "console" others who had lost loved ones.

"Even though it was a very brief... I was really happy in the moment," she wrote on her blog -- which she has since turned private.

During the broadcast the two sat at a table to celebrate Na-yeon's missing birthdays, singing "happy birthday" together.

Before blowing out the candles, Na-yeon made a birthday wish: "I want my mother to stop crying."

Biggest jump in world defence spending in 10 years: study



China increased defence spending by 6.6 percent

Munich Germany

Global spending on defence rose by four per cent in 2019, the largest growth in 10 years, led by big increases from the US and China, a study said yesterday.

Beijing's military modernisation programme -- which includes developing new hard-to-detect hypersonic missiles -- is alarming Washington and helping drive US defence spending, the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) said.

The IISS's annual "Military Balance" report said the increase alone in US spending from 2018 to 2019 -- \$53.4 billion -- was almost as big as Britain's entire defence budget.

Both China and the US increased spending by 6.6 per cent, the report said, while Europe -- driven by ongoing concerns about Russia -- stepped up by 4.2 per cent.

But this growth only brought European defence spending back to levels seen in 2008, before the global financial crisis saw budgets slashed.

European NATO members have been seeking to increase spending to placate President Donald Trump, who has repeatedly accused them of freeloading on the US.

Trump has railed at European allies, particularly Germany, for not living up to a 2014 NATO pledge to spend two per cent of GDP on defence.

The mercurial president's anger over spending has fuelled concern about his commitment to the transatlantic alliance.

Robot waitress serves up smiles in war-torn Afghanistan

Kabul

Afghanistan's first-ever robot waitress glides up to a table of curious diners in central Kabul and presents them with a plate of French fries.

"Thank you very much," the machine says in Dari, one of Afghanistan's two main languages.

Restaurant manager Mohammad Rafi Shirzad says the humanoid robot, imported from Japan and designed to look vaguely like a woman wearing a hijab, has already pulled in new customers since it started working last month.

"It is interesting for many people here to see a robot in real life," he said. "Sometimes kids jump in joy and surprise when they see the robot bring them food."

While robots are becoming increasingly commonplace in Japan and China, they are not unusual in conflict-wracked Af-



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ghanistan.

After decades of war that has left much of the country's infrastructure in ruins, the sight of a battery-powered waitress has provided some light relief in Kabul.

Nine-year-old Ahmad Zaki was desperate to see the ma-

chine.

"I saw the robot on TV, and asked my father to take me to this restaurant," he said.

Named "Timea" and measuring about 150 centimetres (five feet) in height, the robot performs only rudimentary tasks.

It delivers plates to tables, which diners then take from a tray, and can say basic phrases including "Happy Birthday".

It also can stop when it comes across an obstacle, and customers can place orders via a touch panel. But the story is not without controversy.

Some Afghans see Timea as a threat to the country's dire unemployment situation.

"This is ridiculously wrong," Facebook user Kashif Abobaker wrote.

"They employ a robot when there are tens of thousands of young people desperately looking for a job."