

## N Korea murder case: Vietnamese woman loses bid for release



Vietnamese Doan Thi Huong is escorted to court in Shah Alam, Malaysia (Courtesy of the Guardian)

**Shah Alam, Malaysia**

A Vietnamese woman suspected of assassinating the North Korean leader's half-brother lost her bid for immediate release yesterday as Malaysian authorities refused to drop a murder charge, days after her Indonesian co-accused was freed.

Doan Thi Huong broke down in tears as a prosecutor announced the attorney-general had rejected a request to free her and her trial would continue. She has been on trial for a year and a half over the 2017 assassination of Kim Jong Nam at Kuala Lumpur airport.

On Monday a murder charge was unexpectedly withdrawn against the Indonesian woman accused alongside her, Siti Aisyah, raising hopes that Huong might also be freed imminently.

The Vietnamese defendant, who had to be helped out of court by two police officers following the shock announcement, tearfully told reporters: "I am depressed. I am innocent... I want my family to pray for me."

Huong's lawyer said he would make a second bid to get the charge against her dropped, and said failing to free her following Aisyah's

release "does not bring confidence to our criminal justice system".

The pair had always denied murder, saying they were tricked by North Korean spies into carrying out the Cold War-style hit that shocked the world using a highly toxic nerve agent, and believed it was a prank for a reality TV show.

Their lawyers presented them as scapegoats and said the real killers were four North Koreans, who were suspected of being the masterminds behind the plot but fled Malaysia shortly after the assassination.

The prosecutor did not give any reason why charges were not being dropped for Huong, 30, who is now the sole defendant on trial for Kim's murder and could face death by hanging if convicted. Indonesia had mounted a sustained diplomatic offensive to get Aisyah freed, while Vietnam had only stepped up pressure since the Indonesian woman's release this week.

During the trial, the court was shown airport CCTV footage showing Huong approaching Kim, placing her hands on his face and then running away. Aisyah was only seen as a blurred figure fleeing the scene of the crime.

# Oil slick heading to French coast

● France will deploy four ships to help battle the oil slick

AFP | Brest, France

An oil slick was heading towards the French coastline yesterday after an Italian cargo ship sank in the Atlantic carrying 45 containers of "dangerous materials", authorities said.

"According to our forecasts, fragments could reach some areas of the coast in Nouvelle-Aquitaine by Sunday or Monday owing to bad weather, which also risks making the anti-pollution operation more difficult," environment minister Francois de Rugy said Wednesday. France will deploy four ships to help battle the oil slick at sea and will prepare for a clean-up operation on land, he added.

The Grande America was en route from Hamburg in Germany to Casablanca in Morocco when a fire broke out late on Sunday. All 27 people on board were evacuated the following day as the fire worsened, before the ship sank some 300 km west of the town of La Rochelle on Tuesday.

"For now the possible pollution risk consists mainly of the 2,200 tonnes of heavy fuel oil on board," Jean-Louis Lozier, head of the regional maritime authority, told reporters in Brest on France's Brittany coast.

Lozier said the hybrid ship's Italian owner Grimaldi had indicated that 365 shipping containers were onboard, "of which 45 are carrying dangerous materials", as well as around 2,000 vehicles.



Flames on the Italian merchant ship Grande America off the coasts of the French Brittany



The sheet of oil, 10 kilometres (six miles) long and one km wide, could hit parts of the country's southwest region near the port city of Bordeaux this weekend.

The fire is thought to have broken out on the car deck before spreading to a container, however the cause is unknown, Lozier said.

"Around forty containers fell into the sea before the ship sank," he said. "Most of them were badly damaged by the fire." The contents include a hundred tonnes of hydrochloric acid and 70 tonnes of sul-

phuric acid. The pollution risk posed by the chemicals "would be very localised", Lozier said, adding most of it would have already burned in the fire.

"Dilution in the ocean would not have serious consequences for the environment."

But French environmental campaign group Robin des Bois (Robin Hood) said the group intends to file a complaint at Brest district court over the environmental damage.

"Two thousand vehicles -- it's a car crash at the bottom of the sea, representing hundreds of tonnes of toxic materials in an area very rich in fish, plankton and marine animals," said Jacky Bonnemaïns, spokesman for the NGO, adding he also feared possible coastal pollution.

Local authorities have opened an investigation and the ship's owner has been warned to "take all necessary measures to contribute to the fight against pollution", the environment minister said.

## Pakistan, India hold 'positive' talks on Sikh visits



Islamabad, Pakistan

Pakistan and India held "very positive" talks yesterday, as they sat down to discuss a visa-free corridor for Sikh pilgrims just weeks after soaring tensions brought the two nuclear-armed powers to the brink of war.

Officials from the two countries met in Attari, India, to discuss the details of an agreement that would allow Indian Sikhs to visit a shrine to their religion's founder in eastern Pakistan.

Upon completion of the corridor, Indian Sikhs will be able to access the site without first having to apply for a Pakistani visa

"Both sides held detailed and constructive discussions on various aspects and provisions of the proposed agreement and agreed to work towards expeditiously operationalizing the Kartarpur Sahib Corridor," read the joint statement released by Pakistan's foreign ministry.

The two sides are set to meet again in the coming weeks to finalise the deal, the statement added.

"They were very welcoming, the whole meeting took place in a very positive environment," added Pakistan's foreign ministry spokesman Mohammad Faisal.

## Indonesia says uncovers huge explosives stash

Sibolga, Indonesia

Indonesian police said yesterday they had uncovered a huge stash of explosives linked to a terror suspect whose wife blew up herself and a child following a dramatic standoff at their home.

The discovery of some 300 kilograms (660 pounds) of assembled explosives and bomb-making materials raised fears that a major attack was being planned, a month before national elections and less than a year after Indonesia was rocked by a wave of deadly suicide bombings.

The suicide blast early Wednesday morning came after police had arrested the husband, Abu Hamzah, who was identified as a member of Jemaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD).

Officers surrounded the arrested militant's home in Sibolga on Sumatra island when the confrontation began.

During a nearly 12-hour standoff, the wife lobbed an explosive device at security personnel, wounding a police officer, authorities said.

They later found parts of a woman's corpse and that of at least one child. Police initially



Indonesian police prepare to blow up explosives in Sibolga

said they thought two of the couple's children might have been killed.

"We're still trying to formally identify his wife because the body isn't one piece," said national police spokesman Dedi Prasetyo.

Police said they uncovered a large cache of bombs and explosive materials in the couple's home and another in the same city.

"A total of 300 kilogrammes of bombs and bomb-making materials were discovered," Prasetyo said.

On Thursday, police destroyed materials in a controlled explosion in a field.

University of Indonesia terrorism expert Stanislaus Riyanta said the large stash hinted that a serious attack was being planned.

"This is frightening," he said.

"The impact of bombs depends on the materials used. But this amount -- 300 kilogrammes -- if used all at one time, could certainly be very destructive and deadly, especially in a densely populated area."

## Fast and Furious



Mahouts racing their elephants during the Buon Don elephant festival in Vietnam's central highlands of Dak Lak province. Locals say the race is a celebration of the much revered animals -- traditionally thought of as family members in this part of Vietnam -- but conservation groups are calling for an end to the festival, which they say is cruel and outdated.