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Kim Jong Un's half brother was killed by VX nerve agent, Malaysian police say

By **Anna Fifield** February 23

SEOUL — The North Korean leader's half brother was killed by a nerve agent that can cause death within minutes if absorbed through the skin, Malaysian police said Friday.

The finding will add to the increasing evidence suggesting that Kim Jong Un's regime in North Korea was behind last week's brazen and public attack on Kim Jong Nam, which South Korean officials have described as an apparent move by the young North Korean leader to get rid of a potential rival.

The incident, which took place at a busy airport terminal in Kuala Lumpur, the Malaysian capital, could also prove to be the final straw in a diplomatic row between previously friendly Malaysia and North Korea, given that the regime in Pyongyang is now accused of using a certified chemical weapon on Malaysian territory.

"This chemical weapon is banned," Khalid Abu Bakar, Malaysia's inspector general of police, said Friday. The Center for Chemical Weapons Analysis examined swabs from the man's face and eyes and found the nerve agent VX, he said.

"We will investigate how the chemical substance was brought into Malaysia," Khalid told reporters in Kuala Lumpur, noting that VX was listed as a chemical weapon under the international [Chemical Weapons Convention](#) and Malaysia's own laws.

Police are also asking the government's atomic energy agency to decontaminate the busy airport terminal 11 days after the attack. VX can remain on material, equipment and terrain for long periods, the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons says.

VX, one of the fastest-acting chemical warfare agents, is much more toxic than sarin, especially when it enters through the skin, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

"Symptoms will appear within a few seconds after exposure to the vapor form of VX, and within a few minutes to up to 18 hours after exposure to the liquid form," the CDC says on its website. "It is possible that any visible VX liquid contact on the skin, unless washed off immediately, would be lethal."

Exposure to a large dose of VX can cause convulsions, a loss of consciousness and respiratory failure possibly leading to death, the center says.

VX is not difficult to produce, said Matthew Meselson, a professor of biochemistry at Harvard University and a board member of the Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation. "A good organic chemist could synthesize VX relatively easily," he said. "You could get the ingredients and make it in a couple of days, and if you make it pure, it's quite stable."

Britain developed VX in the early 1950s. The United States started producing it in 1958, and the Soviet Union also developed its own version.

The only previously confirmed death caused by VX was in a case in 1994, when a member of the Japanese cult Aum Shinrikyo used the nerve agent against a former colleague, although it is also believed to have been used by Iraqi President Saddam Hussein on Kurds during the final days of the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s.

According to reports, VX was among the chemical weapons stockpiled by Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria until it agreed to get rid of that arsenal in 2014. Syria and North Korea have had friendly relations that continue to this day.

North Korea claims that it does not possess chemical weapons, but South Korea's Defense Ministry estimates that the Pyongyang regime has between 2,500 and 5,000 metric tons of chemical weapons, which would be the third-largest stockpile after those of the United States and Russia.

The South Korean government has assessed that North Korea can produce most types of chemical weapons indigenously, according to a summary of the country's capabilities on the Nuclear Threat Initiative website. Nerve agents such as Sarin and VX are thought to be the focus of North Korean production, it said.

Malaysian officials have said two women, one Indonesian and one Vietnamese, attacked Kim Jong Nam at the airport, smearing some kind of cream on his face. He immediately sought help and was taken to the airport medical clinic, where leaked photos show him slumped in a chair with his eyes closed just minutes later. He reportedly suffered seizures, then died in an ambulance on his way to a hospital.

It is not clear how the women who carried out the attack survived, although they reportedly told police that they felt nauseous afterward, with one of them vomiting.

Security camera footage showed them rushing to the bathroom immediately after the attack, presumably to wash their hands, Malaysian authorities said. VX, though fast acting, is soluble in cold water. Malaysian police have not reported finding any gloves at the scene.

South Korean authorities have accused Kim Jong Un, who came to power in North Korea in 2011, of putting out a "standing order" to assassinate his older half brother, who was 45.

Kim Jong Un has a track record of getting rid of potential contenders for the leadership of North Korea. He had his uncle, Jang Song Thaek, executed at the end of 2013 for apparently amassing his own power base. Jang was a mentor to Kim Jong Nam, who had previously been considered a possible leader in the three-generation communist dynasty.

North Korea had strongly objected to Malaysia conducting an autopsy on the man's body, saying that he carried a diplomatic passport and therefore was not subject to local laws.

The North Korean ambassador in Kuala Lumpur has read out several angry statements, accusing Malaysia of trying to "besmirch" Pyongyang's reputation at the behest of the South Korean government. This was reiterated in a virulent 763-word statement published by the North's state news agency.

There were also reports of an attempted break-in at the hospital morgue where Kim Jong Nam's body is being held.

But the Kuala Lumpur government, one of the few in the world that had friendly relations with Pyongyang, has remained adamant that it will follow all procedures required when a suspicious death occurs on its soil.

It has named eight North Koreans, including one diplomat, whom it considers suspects in the attack. One, a scientist who had been living in Kuala Lumpur for a year, is in custody, but three others, including the diplomat, are believed to be at large in Malaysia. The other four left Malaysia on the day of the attack, taking a circuitous route via Dubai and Vladivostok, Russia, to get back to Pyongyang without going through China.

The North Korean under arrest in Malaysia, Ri Jong Chol, 47, is reported to have a background in chemistry and to have studied in India.

The Chinese government had been protecting Kim Jong Nam and was widely thought to consider him a potential replacement for Kim Jong Un if the North Korean leader became intolerably hostile to Beijing.

No family members have come to claim Kim Jong Nam's body, which Malaysian authorities have said they cannot release without DNA identification.

“There is no arrangement yet for the next-of-kin to come to Malaysia. We have requested the North Korean Embassy to inform the next of kin and are still waiting for the embassy and officials to respond,” Khalid, the police chief, told Malaysia's Bernama news agency.

Anna Fifield is The Post's bureau chief in Tokyo, focusing on Japan and the Koreas. She previously reported for the Financial Times from Washington DC, Seoul, Sydney, London and from across the Middle East. 🐦 Follow @annafifield