

Once-reviled scavenger bird now the pride of its Indian home

By Wasbir Hussain
The Associated Press

GAUHATI, India — The greater adjutant stork used to be an object of revulsion in northeast India. It's not a pretty bird, with its large, dull-orange bill and gray, black, and white plumage. A carnivore and scavenger, it leaves bits of dead animals in its nests. People thought it brought bad luck, so they destroyed nests and sometimes poisoned the birds.

The fortunes of the species may turn on local pride.

Local women took it upon themselves early last year to form a conservation movement for the bird in Assam state, one of only three homes the species has left. The women, known as the hargila army for the bird's name in the Assamese language, sing hymns and weave scarves and other items on handlooms with motifs of the bird to create awareness about the need to protect the species.

Only 1,200 of the large storks survive in the world, according to estimates from the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources. Assam has about two-thirds of them, largely in three villages just northwest of the state capital of Gauhati.

The other 400 or so greater adjutant storks are found in the eastern Indian



state of Bihar and in Cambodia.

The conservation movement wasn't easy to sell; wildlife biologist Purnima Devi Barman needed almost eight years to convince locals the bird was crucial to the ecosystem.

"It was seen as a bird with an evil omen that brings in carcass and other rotten stuff," said Barman, who works with a local conservation group called Aranyak.

"We had to involve the locals because the bird nests on trees owned by individual households. The future of the greater

adjutant stork depends on individual tree owners who used to fell trees earlier to get rid of the nests," Barman said.

The locals now call Barman "hargila baideo," or hargila sister, after she organized and named the movement, now involving nearly 150 women.

Once the women began to feel pride in ensuring the survival of the bird, they spread the message.

Hymns are sung in the local prayer hall for the stork's survival. At Sankardev Sishu Niketan, the school where most local

SAVING THE SCAVENGER STORK. Students at Sankardev Sishu Niketan, a school in Dadara village, west of Gauhati, India, mold clay in the shape of a greater adjutant stork, an endangered bird with a total population of 1,200 in the world. A group of women have taken it upon themselves to save the endangered bird. They call themselves the hargila army, for the bird's name in the local Assamese language. (AP Photo/Anupam Nath)

children study, the teachers talk about protecting the bird.

"We have launched a pride campaign among the children and youth so they can proudly say their village is home to the hargilas," Barman said.

The movement also found support from local government authorities, who have provided nets to protect young storks falling out of the nest during storms or windy days. The critical period is the breeding season from August to April.

"We are providing looms for the weavers and educational grants to children of tree owners in the area as they are going all out in protecting the bird," said Vinod Sachan, the local district magistrate.

In January more than two dozen greater adjutant storks were found dead in a neighborhood near Gauhati. Forensic testing is being done to learn the cause.

"The news of so many hargilas dying has cast a pall of gloom amongst us. We need to do more to save this globally endangered bird," said Barman.

North Korea says it will reject Malaysia autopsy of Kim half brother

By Eileen Ng
The Associated Press

KUALA LUMPUR, Malaysia — North Korea says it will reject the results of an autopsy on its leader's estranged half brother, the victim of an apparent assassination at an airport in Malaysia. Pyongyang's ambassador said Malaysian officials may be "trying to conceal something" and "colluding with hostile forces."

Speaking to reporters gathered outside the morgue in Kuala Lumpur, North Korean ambassador Kang Chol said Malaysia conducted the autopsy on Kim Jong Nam "unilaterally and excluding our attendance."

Kim Jong Nam, who was 45 or 46 years old and had lived in exile for years, suddenly fell ill at the Kuala Lumpur airport while waiting for a flight home to Macau. Dizzy and in pain, he told medical workers at the airport he had been sprayed with a chemical. He died while being taken to a hospital.

"We will categorically reject the result of the postmortem," Kang said, adding that the move disregarded "elementary international laws and consular laws."

Kang said the fact that Malaysia has yet to hand over the body "strongly suggests that the Malaysian side is trying to conceal something which needs more time and deceive us, and that they are colluding with the hostile forces towards us who are desperate to harm us."

South Korea has accused its enemies in North Korea of dispatching a hit squad to kill Kim Jong Nam at the airport in Kuala Lumpur, saying two female assassins poisoned him then fled in a taxi.

North Korean diplomats in Malaysia objected to an autopsy and had requested custody of Kim Jong Nam's body, arguing that he had a North Korean passport. Malaysian authorities went ahead with the procedure anyway, saying they did not receive a formal complaint.

The autopsy could provide some clarity in a case marked by speculation, tales of intrigue, and explosive, unconfirmed reports from duelling nations. Authorities are awaiting the autopsy results.

Malaysia said it wants DNA samples from Kim Jong Nam's family as part of the post-mortem procedure and that officials

were not yet willing to hand the body over to the North Koreans. Although Kim Jong Nam is believed to have two sons and a daughter with two women living in Beijing and Macau, police in Malaysia say none have come forward to claim the body or provide DNA samples.

"If there is no claim by next-of-kin and upon exhausting all avenues (to obtain DNA), we will finally then hand over the body to the (North Korean) embassy," said Abdul Samah Mat, a senior Malaysian police official. He would not say how long that process might take.

Malaysian police have arrested three people in the investigation but have released few details.

Indonesia's national police chief said the Indonesian woman arrested for suspected involvement in the death was duped into thinking she was part of a comedy show prank. The police chief, Tito Karnavian, said he was citing information received from Malaysian authorities.

Karnavian told reporters in Indonesia's Aceh province that Siti Aisyah, 25, was paid to be involved in "Just For Laughs" style pranks, a reference to a popular hidden-camera show.

He said she and another woman performed stunts which involved convincing men to close their eyes and then spraying them with water.

"Such an action was done three or four times and they were given a few dollars for it, and with the last target, Kim Jong Nam, allegedly there were dangerous materials in the sprayer," Karnavian said. "She was not aware that it was an assassination attempt by alleged foreign agents."

Karnavian's comments were made after a male relative of Aisyah said in an Indonesian television interview that she had been hired to perform in a short comedy movie and travelled to China as part of this work. Indonesian immigration has said Aisyah travelled to Malaysia and other countries it did not specify.

Investigators are still trying to piece together details of the case, and South Korea has not said how it concluded that North Korea was behind the killing.

Malaysian police are questioning three suspects — Aisyah, another woman who carried a Vietnamese passport, and a man they said is Aisyah's boyfriend.

Kim Jong Nam was estranged from his younger half brother, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un. He reportedly fell out of favor with their father, the late Kim Jong Il, in 2001, when he was caught trying to enter Japan on a false passport to visit Tokyo Disneyland.

Yoji Gomi, a Japanese journalist who wrote a book about Kim Jong Nam, said he criticized the family regime and believed a leader should be chosen "through a democratic process."

Gomi said he met Kim Jong Nam by chance at Beijing's international airport in 2004, leading to exchanges of 150 e-mails and two interviews in 2011 — one in

Beijing and another in Macau — totalling seven hours.

Kim Jong Nam appeared nervous during the interview in Macau, Gomi said.

"He must have been aware of the danger, but I believe he still wanted to convey his views to Pyongyang via the media," Gomi said. "He was sweating all over his body, and seemed very uncomfortable when he responded to my questions. He was probably worried about the impact of his comments and expressions. The thought now gives me a pain in my heart."

In Indonesia, Aisyah's family and former neighbors said they were stunned by her

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