

Malaysia won't drop case against Vietnamese in Kim killing

By Eileen Ng
The Associated Press

SHAH ALAM, Malaysia — Malaysia's attorney-general has ordered the murder case to proceed against a Vietnamese woman accused in the killing of the estranged half brother of North Korea's leader, prosecutors said in court.

Prosecutor Iskandar Ahmad gave no explanation for the refusal to drop the murder charge against Doan Thi Huong, who is the only suspect in custody after the stunning decision to drop the case against Indonesian Siti Aisyah.

The decision to move forward with Huong's case was slammed by both her lawyer and Vietnam's ambassador, who had hoped she would be given the same leniency as Aisyah.

Ambassador Le Quy Quynh said he was "very disappointed" with the decision. He said Vietnam's justice minister had written to the Malaysian attorney-general seeking Huong's release and that Vietnam would keep lobbying Malaysia to free her.

"We will request Malaysia to have fair judgement and release her as soon as possible," he said.

Huong's lawyer, Hisyam Teh Poh Teik, was more blunt, telling the court the decision was "perverse." He said prosecutors were being unfair to Huong as her case was similar to Aisyah.

"Very obviously, there is discrimination. The AG favored one party to the other," Teh said.

Huong and Aisyah were accused of smearing the toxic VX nerve agent on Kim



Jong Nam's face in an airport terminal in Kuala Lumpur on February 13, 2017. They have said they thought they were taking part in a harmless prank for a television show.

They were the only people in custody after four North Korean suspects fled the country the same morning Kim was killed. Both women were charged separately but the charge against them is the same: That they had colluded with the four North Korean suspects to murder Kim.

A High Court judge last August had found there was enough evidence to infer that Aisyah, Huong, and the four North Koreans engaged in a "well-planned conspiracy" to kill Kim.

Lawyers for the women argued that they were pawns in a political assassination

with clear links to the North Korean Embassy in Kuala Lumpur, and that the prosecution failed to show the women had any intention to kill. Intent to kill is crucial to a murder charge under Malaysian law.

Huong's lawyer sought a deferment of the trial, saying she was unwell and needed medical treatment. He said Huong only slept an hour a night since Aisyah's release and was not in a position to testify.

When asked by the judge if she was unwell, Huong stood in the dock and said she suffered from tension and stress.

"I have no idea what is going on," a tired and pale-looking Huong, who was wrapped in a red headscarf and a coat, said through an interpreter.

The judge agreed to postpone the trial until April 1 but warned there should be no

UNEXPLAINED INEQUALITY. Vietnamese Doan Thi Huong, center, is escorted by police as she leaves Shah Alam High Court in Shah Alam, Malaysia. Malaysia's attorney general ordered the murder case to proceed against the Vietnamese woman accused in the killing of the North Korean leader's estranged half brother, prosecutors said in court. (AP Photo/Vincent Thian)

more delay. The defense phase of the trial was to have already begun.

Huong was sobbing as she spoke to Vietnamese Embassy officials after the court hearing ended.

In Huong's village in Vietnam, her family was crestfallen.

"I had hoped for good news today, but unfortunately there is none. I'm very sad and disappointed. I had hoped my daughter would be freed like the Indonesian woman," said her 66-year-old father Doan Van Thanh.

He said he believes his daughter is innocent and told her to "stay calm and hope for the best outcome."

Huong's stepmother, Nguyen Thi Vy, was in tears as she slammed the court's decision.

"It's so unfair. They were together, did the same thing," she said.

Huong could face a death sentence if she is convicted.

Naran Singh, another lawyer for Huong, said it was very rare for the attorney-general to drop a murder case after the judge had called for their defense. He urged the attorney-general to be transparent and explain why he dropped the case against Aisyah but not Huong.

Associated Press reporter Hau Dinh in Vietnam contributed to this report.

By Joe McDonald
The Associated Press

BEIJING — The downturn in China's auto market worsened in January and February as an economic slowdown and a tariff fight with Washington chilled demand in the industry's biggest global market.

Malaysia backtracks on plans to abolish death penalty

KUALA LUMPUR, Malaysia (AP) — Malaysia's government has backtracked on abolishing capital punishment, saying instead that the death penalty would no longer be mandatory for selected offenses. Rights groups slammed the reversal and urged it to reconsider.

Deputy law minister Hanipa Maidin made the announcement in parliament but didn't give any reasons for the change. He was quoted by the country's Bernama news agency as saying the death penalty would not be mandatory for 11 offenses but courts would have discretion to impose such sentences for those crimes.

N. Surendran, adviser to rights group Lawyers for Liberty, said it was a "complete U-turn" from the government's announcement in October that it planned to abolish the death penalty for all of the nearly three dozen offenses for which it was applicable.

The total abolition plan was widely praised internationally and he said the sudden reversal was "shocking, unprincipled, and embarrassing." He said it appeared to be motivated by fear of a political backlash and slammed the government for "moral cowardice."

"In short, the government sacrificed principle on the altar of political expediency," he said in a statement. He urged the government to reconsider its decision. He said the death penalty is not a deterrent for serious crime and noted that a wrongful conviction is irreversible.

The Malaysian Coalition Against the Death Penalty echoed the call for the government to review its decision. The group voiced concern that there are no protections for the vulnerable and no sentencing guidelines for the court to consider in deciding whether to hand down a death sentence.

"So long as the death penalty exists within our system, there is no guarantee that an innocent or vulnerable person will not be wrongly sentenced and executed," it said.

The two groups also urged the government to maintain its current moratorium on all executions and review the case of every prisoner on death row.

China's auto sales contraction worsens in February

Sales of SUVs, minivans, and sedans plunged 17.5 percent from a year earlier to 3.2 million SUVs, minivans, and sedans in the first two months of 2019, according to an industry group, the China Association of Auto Manufacturers. Total vehicle sales, including trucks and busses, fell 15 percent to 3.8 million units.

The decline in sales of passenger cars in January was 15 percent.

Economists and industrial analysts often combine the first two months of the year when looking at consumer activity to screen out the effect of the Lunar New Year holiday, when factories close for up to two weeks and commercial activity falls.

Chinese consumers are putting off big purchases amid

an economic downturn that saw growth last year fall to a three-decade low of 6.6 percent. Trade tension with Washington is fuelling consumer jitters.

The auto slump is squeezing revenue for global and Chinese automakers that are spending heavily to meet government targets to develop electric vehicles.

Last year's auto sales suffered their first decline in nearly three decades, falling 4.1 percent from 2017 to 23.7 million.

The downturn has prompted suggestions Beijing will cut sales taxes or offer other incentives.

Sales by Chinese brands fell 23 percent to 1.3 million units in January and February, according to CAAM.

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