The latest news item about DPRK’s bloody regime is spreading throughout the globe. The conservative South Korean newspaper the Chosun Ilbo cited an unnamed source in its article, which said that in March 2019, the former Ambassador to Spain, Kim Hyok-chol, who headed negotiations in the runup to the Summit between Kim Jong-un and Donald Trump in Hanoi, had been shot dead. He was executed by firing squad along with four other senior officials at an airport, because charges of spying for the United States were levelled against them. In addition, the chief architect behind the Summit in Singapore and the former director of the Reconnaissance General Bureau (North Korea’s primary intelligence service), Kim Yong-chol, was sent to a labor camp in the Chagang Province. Kim Song-hye from the United Front Department also ended up in a political prison camp, and Kim Jong-un’s interpreter at the Summit, Shin Hye-yong, was accused of “tarnishing the authority of the leader” because of an interpreting error, and was also sent to a camp.

Naturally, Kim Jong-un ordered this “cleansing” in order to quell internal unrest and the growing public discontent with the failed summit between the DPRK leader and Donald Trump.

Furthermore, the newspaper used the following quote from a recent article in Rodong Sinmun “Acting like one is revering the leader in front(of others) but dreaming of something else when one turns around is an anti-party, anti-revolutionary act that has thrown away the moral fidelity toward the leader, and such people will not avoid the stern judgment of the revolution…”. The opinion that such rhetoric was last used after Jang Song-taek’s execution in December 2013 was also expressed by the paper. In reality, the article in question was published very recently, while the execution had taken place in March, but still a trend was readily apparent.
It is important to highlight that news about the repressions and the death of the four diplomats first appeared in this newspaper as far back as the end of April. The story cited the Asia Press agency and said that the execution was public. The men “were accused of taking bribes to leak confidential information to U.S. officials while negotiating the agenda before the summit”. The article also mentioned that Kim Hyok-chol and Kim Song-hye had been reprimanded over the failed summit, but Asia Press said these rumors had not been verified.

So why is the author of this article 95% sure that this news item is a red herring?

We would like to remind our readers that although the Chosun Ilbo is a leading conservative newspaper in South Korea, its sheer number of articles about the DPRK and their content also make this paper an undisputed “champion-publisher of fake news”.

Here is a simple example to illustrate this point. Only in recent months, this newspaper has written the following things about North Korea.

- An article said that after overseeing missile tests on 9 May, Kim Jong-un had gone to ground, binging on food and alcohol, “due to stress after his failed summit” in Hanoi. This information stems from unnamed but knowledgeable experts. However, according to sources (with names) in the same article, Kim Jong-un's flushed face during the Summit in Vladivostok could in fact “be a sign of worsening hyperlipidemia and diabetes”. This information directly contradicts claims made by the anonymous defector that the DPRK leader is an alcoholic. So who should we then believe?

- “North Korea has the highest death rate from air pollution after Afghanistan in comparison to other countries in Asia”. Apparently, according to a report issued by the World Health Organization (WHO), 207 “people per every 100,000 North Koreans died from ambient particulate air pollution” emitted by “antiquated coal-fired power plants”.

- The Falun Gong spiritual movement is spreading so quickly throughout the DPRK that the authorities “issued a proclamation ordering citizens to voluntarily report their status as believers in Falun Gong,” and “threatened to impose harsh punishments on those” who did not turn themselves in but are found after the reporting period”. It turns out that “more than 100 Falun Gong followers were arrested during a crackdown in Pyongyang last month, but the negative publicity backfired and actually sparked interest in the movement”, including from the North Korean elite. This information, of course, came from yet another anonymous source cited by Radio Free Asia.

- This media outlet also reported on another news item. Apparently, all of the South Korean manufacturing equipment from the Kaesong Industrial Complex was either stolen or was being secretly used to make clothes, which were then smuggled to China and exported to the rest of the world.

- “Satellite photographs of North Korea at night still show that it is practically invisible at night”, “because a drought drastically lowered hydroelectric power output” in the country. In truth, however, a photograph from 2014 was used in this news story (as an illustration). But this time around, Chinese towns and cities bordering North Korea were not photoshopped out of the image as had been done previously.

- Kim Jong-un is now being called a "gift from heaven", and it makes no difference that this phrase is not used in the DPRK, but instead in Protestant sects when referring to their “guru”.

Another tear jerker from the same publication deserves a separate mention. Seemingly, “the North Korean regime is turning to advanced technology to track would-be defectors and nab their traffickers”.

Recently, “a nine-year-old girl escaped from North Korea. Her parents had fled and settled down in South Korea earlier and had planned for her to follow them, but the regime got wind of the escape plan. .... Just before she crossed the border she was given a stuffed frog toy by a man. ... She arrived in China with the doll in her arms. But the trafficker” (this term is usually used to refer to smugglers and traders in human life) “examined the toy more closely and found” a GPS tracking device. The source of this information is the Caleb Mission Society (a Protestant NGO), which, as recently as 2013 engaged in espionage by filming DPRK military manufacturing plants with the aid of the aforementioned gadgets.

All of these are unverified rumors from dubious sources. Incidentally, the Chosun Ilbo writes false reports about other issues too. Currently, there is a scandal brewing around the newspaper linked to fake interviews with experts, who, in fact, never gave them in the first place.

In the meantime, the Blue House and South Korea’s Ministry of Unification released a statement saying that they did not have any information about the execution of diplomats. There were no reports about it in official media sources from the DPRK either. The spokeswoman for the South Korean government, Koh Min-jeong, stated that such premature conclusions and comments about the issue were inappropriate at this stage.
Yes, it is true that civil servants are often executed in the DPRK or that they simply disappear. Sometimes, these people even return “to their former lives”, even after South Korea’s intelligence agencies had reported about their executions. At times this happens after several months or years if the person in question has not fallen gravely ill or has been demoted to a post of a tractor operator, for example.

Still, it is no secret that the dialogue between the United States and the DPRK has stalled, and both sides have started to raise the stakes while exchanging insults. In such a climate, it is very convenient to add fuel to the fire and then hope that either the USA will believe (or will want to believe) a news item, and then decide that the “insane North Korean regime was indeed to be held responsible”, or the DPRK is using “vile slurs” in order to change its policies.

Konstantin Asmolov, PhD in History, Leading Research Fellow at the Centre for Korean Studies of the Institute of Far Eastern Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook”. 