On March 5, 2018 a sensational headline appeared in several Western newspapers: North Korea has used chemical weapons against its own citizens! Having reached that conclusion, the USA imposed new sanctions on the DPRK in accordance with the Chemical and Biological Weapons Control and Warfare Elimination Act, passed in 1991. Sanctions prohibit the USA from exporting technology and materials connected with security, selling weapons, and providing financial or other aid to the DPRK.

“The use of deadly chemical weapons against its own citizens” is a very dramatic sounding phrase- it suggests to readers, at the very least, a large scale chemical attack such as those Assad’s regime is accused of carrying out, or Saddam Hussein’s attack on the rebellious Kurds. In fact, as the US State Department made clear, “the use of chemical weapons” refers to the killing of Kim Jong-nam, the half-brother of the North Korean leader Kim Jong-un using the toxic substance VX. Despite the fact that Pyongyang’s involvement has not been proved by any court, the USA has already used this incident to put the DPRK back on the list of countries sponsoring terrorism.

Readers will remember that Kim Jong-nam was killed in February last year in Kuala-Lumpur airport after two young women, Siti Aisyah and Đoàn Thị Hương smeared his face with a gel that is believed to have contained VX (the deceased, before his death, managed to say that something had been sprayed in his face). The two women, who had previously worked in an escort service, believed that they were taking part in a reality television show. They now face the death penalty, and their counsel have chosen a completely understandable defense: “our clients were
tricked by secret DPRK agents, who are entirely to blame for what happened."

It is now known that Kim Jong-nam was poisoned with VX, an organophosphorus compound. That could be seen from the victim’s appearance (for example, his pupils were constricted) and from the results of analysis, which have been made public. However, the toxic substance was only definitely identified a long time after the South Korean intelligence services and media had made arbitrary claims without having access to investigatory documents about its nature. Of course, it could have just been a lucky guess, but, if desired, other explanations for such coincidence could be found. Especially if it is remembered that the initial autopsy and chemical analysis have failed to establish the cause of death, and that reports of unidentified persons attempting to gain access to the morgue afterwards, appeared on the Internet. Those enjoying conspiracy theories may suggest that the body was tampered with after death to ensure a convenient diagnosis.

But this is still not anything like a mass chemical attack. Two weeks later, the authorities checked Kuala Lumpur airport, where Kim Jong-nam was attacked, but no traces of any toxic substances were found.

One more very interesting fact is worth mentioning: the dead man was found to have been carrying 12 vials of atropine, which is known to be an antidote to exactly the type of toxic substance that caused his death. However, the deceased did not lose consciousness immediately but spoke for some time first to his security guard and then to medical personnel. It is strange that he did not tell them about the antidote in his luggage, and, according to one theory, first aid was deliberately withheld, as it was in someone’s interest that he should die on the way to hospital, whether or not there was any antidote in his bag.

Meanwhile, the investigations into the killing are still in full swing and so far no definite proof of the DPRK’s involvement has been produced. However, many interesting facts have come to light, which could, if so wished, form the basis for a very curious story.

First of all it is has been shown that the women accused of attacking Mr. Kim had, believing that this was part of a talent competition, already carried out similar attacks on other people and been paid a reward. Siti Aisyah, one of the two accused, received 400 rupees from a man called James (who was, it is claimed, actually a North Korean named Ri Ji-U) to perform three pranks in the Bukit Bintang department store. That was done as early as January 5, 2017, and a video of the pranks was made, which, according to ‘James’, would be put on YouTube. It is true that the investigators did not find any confirmation of the time and place of the show, but if that is true then it appears that the ‘training’ of the future assassins took place a long time before Mr. Kim’s arrival in Malaysia.

Siti Aisyah had also used baby oil several days before. On February 3, 7, and 11 she performed similar pranks in the airport and was paid $550 from a person calling himself “Chang”. “Chang” was the name used by one of the suspects, the North Korean Hong Song-hac, who “James” introduced to her on January 21, 2017 in Phnom Penh airport. On February 7, after another prank, she uploaded a post onto Facebook: “Last day shooting, hopefully given the trust, contract extended, even though tired but energized”.

According to Siti Aisyah, “James” then asked her to smear the next victim with lotion from behind and then immediately run away. However, no traces of Siti Asiyah’s DNA were found on the body or clothes of the deceased.

Secondly, it is known that the accused did not make any deliberate attempt to remove traces of the toxic substance or destroy any clues, nor did they try to leave Malaysia immediately. That is particularly true for Đoàn Thị Hương, who got a lot of media attention thanks to her t-shirt with the slogan “LOL”. The police officers who arrested her said that she had not tried to get rid of that evidence (for example by straightaway throwing it away in a bin) and in her first interview with law enforcement personnel she admitted she had entered the country to shoot a prank video.

There is one other event which may turn out to be one of the missing pieces in the puzzle. On March 4 Austrian media reported that the Austrian Public Prosecutor’s Office for Combatting Economic Crimes and Corruption had launched an investigation into agents of the domestic counter-intelligence service in connection with the secret handover of North Korean passports to the South Korean authorities. It appears that in 2015 the Austrian state printing company received an order from the DPRK for the production of 200 000 biometric passports. In 2016, the South Korean special services, using the Austrian counter-intelligence service as an intermediary, secretly obtained possession of some of these documents. It is unclear whether or not these operations were carried out with the consent of the government of the DPRK or whether Pyongyang was informed of them at all.

Naturally, South Korean agents would be unlikely to be able to enter North Korea using those passports. But stolen passports can also be used to carry out false flag operations in a third country! So there are already facts to support
a range of very different theories, and it is, to say the least, too early to claim that North Korea’s involvement has been proved.

And, to return to the subject of the new sanctions, then their demonstrative, made up and demonising character is clear: given the pressure being directed against that country from all directions it is unlikely that they could have more than a symbolic effect, as in reality the USA and the DPRK do not have any trade or other links. However, as South Korean media have pointed out, they do “once again demonstrate the fairness of actions against North Korea, and draw attention to the fact that a serious crime against humanity has been committed.” It does not even worth commenting on the fact that this issue has arisen at a time when North and South Korea have been actively working together. No, it is no coincidence, but it is one more step in the demonization of the DPRK, because few people will remember the details but the vast majority will be left with a mental picture that has no basis in fact- the use of chemical weapons against citizens.

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