

South Korea demonises North Korea over Malaysian murder

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The South Korean government this week seized on the murder of Kim Jong-nam, the estranged half-brother of North Korean leader Kim Jong-un to launch a campaign to further isolate the country, laying the basis for a dangerous confrontation on the Korean Peninsula.

Addressing the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva on Monday, South Korean Foreign Minister Yun Byung-se condemned Pyongyang over the assassination and claimed that several hundred top North Korean officials had been “openly or extrajudicially executed.” He called for the North Korean leadership to be taken before the International Criminal Court for human rights abuses.

Yesterday, Yun appeared before a UN-backed Conference on Disarmament in Geneva and accused North Korea of using chemical weapons to carry out the assassination. Malaysian authorities assert that Kim Jong-nam was killed by the highly potent and banned nerve agent VX when he was attacked by two women at Kuala Lumpur airport on February 13. Yun claimed that North Korea had a large stockpile of chemical weapons, including VX.

Yun declared that the UN Security Council and countries that are a party to the Chemical Weapons Convention should take up the case as a “high priority.” He called for “collective measures,” suggesting that North Korea be suspended as a UN member. North Korea denied it had produced, stockpiled or used chemical weapons and emphatically rejected Yun’s remarks.

Yun’s comments show that the as-yet-unexplained murder of Kim Jong-nam is being exploited by South Korea, backed by the US and its allies, as a pretext for ramping up the vilification of North Korea in preparation for further punitive measures. It is also a

convenient diversion from the intense political crisis surrounding the South Korean government following the impeachment of President Park Geun-hye.

From day one, before police inquiries had even begun, South Korean intelligence officials blamed Pyongyang for the death, and claimed it was carried out by two North Korean agents. In fact, the two women, who allegedly smeared the poison on Kim’s face, were from Vietnam and Indonesia.

Well before Malaysian police announced that VX was used, acting South Korean President Hwang Kyo-ahn on February 20 denounced the murder as “an intolerable crime against humanity and [a] terrorist act” masterminded by the Pyongyang regime.

To further demonise North Korea, South Korea’s National Intelligence Service gave a closed-door briefing to the country’s lawmakers on Monday, details of which were promptly leaked to the media. The NIS claimed, without any substantiation, that eight North Koreans being held or sought by Malaysia were mostly secret police agents and foreign ministry officials who formed two teams to carry out the assassination. The NIS is notorious for its propaganda and dirty tricks against North Korea.

It remains unclear who carried out the killing and why. Few details have been made public and many questions remain unanswered. The Malaysian police are yet to complete their investigation and have just forwarded the case against the two alleged women attackers to the attorney-general, recommending they be charged with murder. As well as the two women, a North Korean citizen has been arrested. Seven other North Koreans, including a senior embassy official in Malaysia, have been named as suspects.

North Korea has yet to acknowledge the dead man as Kim Jong-nam and has blasted Malaysia over its

refusal to immediately return the body to North Korea. Kim was reportedly travelling back to Macau on a diplomatic passport under the name Kim Chol.

A belated North Korean statement last week denied that Kim Jong-nam was poisoned, claiming, without any evidence, that Malaysian authorities had initially said he had died of a heart attack. It accused Malaysia of being in league with “the anti-DPRK [North Korea] conspiratorial racket launched by South Korean authorities.”

A high-level North Korean delegation arrived in Kuala Lumpur yesterday, headed by the country’s former deputy UN ambassador, Ri Tong-il, to demand the hand-over of Kim Jong-nam’s body, the release of North Korean suspect Ri Jong-chol, and to patch up frayed relations between the two countries. Malaysia has withdrawn its ambassador from Pyongyang.

Regardless of who carried out the murder, the extensive, continuing and often lurid media coverage, along with South Korea’s latest statements, point to another, more sinister agenda.

US, Japanese and South Korean officials responsible for North Korea met on Monday in Washington to discuss tougher measures against Pyongyang, including how to better enforce existing diplomatic and economic sanctions over its nuclear and missile programs. The three countries denounced North Korea’s ballistic missile test on February 12.

Last Friday the Trump administration cancelled planned “back-channel” talks between former American officials and a delegation of North Korean officials, effectively blocking any future negotiations with Pyongyang.

The death of Kim Jong-nam plays directly into the growing clamour in US military and foreign policy circles for action to prevent North Korea from building a nuclear-capable intercontinental ballistic missile. The open discussion of hostile measures, including possible military action against the North Korean regime, is also aimed against its ally, China, which Trump has already singled out for trade war penalties and threats against its islets in the South China Sea.

Reflecting this discussion, Trump told a select group of reporters on Monday night: “North Korea is a world menace, it is a world problem.” In what can only be construed as a threat, he added that Pyongyang “has to be dealt with soon.”

Washington Post editorial on Sunday, entitled “An outlaw killing,” was the latest to call on the Trump administration to move against North Korea and to demand greater pressure on China to penalise Pyongyang economically. The editorial joined the chorus of commentators calling for North Korea to be put back on the US State Department’s list of state sponsors of terrorism.

Another comment, on the *Foreign Policy* website, was headlined “China must be persuaded to squeeze North Korea’s lifeline.” China, which has just announced an end to all coal imports from North Korea for the rest of the year, is by far the country’s largest export market. The article concluded: “Although the recent suspension of North Korean coal imports is a promising sign, China needs to be persuaded to send Pyongyang an ultimatum: nuclear weapons or economic survival.”

This mounting drumbeat against North Korea is a sharp warning that the US and its allies are preparing to recklessly ratchet up a confrontation with North Korea and China. The furore around Kim Jong-nam’s murder and denunciations of North Korea’s alleged chemical “weapons of mass destruction” are part of an all-too-familiar process of demonisation that has been the precursor to the US-led regime-change operations and wars in the Middle East.



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