

# Malaysia, North Korea Ties Run Deep

**Malaysia has emerged as a stomping ground for North Koreans as well as a venue for unofficial talks between Pyongyang and Washington**

By Jonathan Cheng, James Hookway and Celine Fernandez

The killing of North Korean leader Kim Jong Un's half brother in Malaysia puts a spotlight on a U.S. ally that has emerged in recent years as a stomping ground for North Koreans and a venue for unofficial talks between Washington and Pyongyang.

With business connections, relatively lax travel restrictions and even a direct air connection for several years, Malaysia is more closely linked to the reclusive North than many other countries with friendly ties to the U.S.

Unlike America, Japan and South Korea, Malaysia generally has reasonably friendly relations with North Korea, giving citizens of the isolated nation a chance to mix with the outside world.

Malaysian citizens are allowed visa-free travel to the country, while North Korea buys rubber, palm oil and other raw materials from the country. Malaysia, meanwhile, imports iron and steel products.

In 2011, direct flights by North Korea's flagship carrier, Air Koryo, began operating between Pyongyang and Kuala Lumpur, though that route was discontinued in mid-2014 after a new round of United Nations Security Council sanctions against the country.

There are also plenty of business ties between the two countries, according to Christopher Green, a researcher in North Korean studies at Leiden University in the Netherlands, who estimates that the North Korean community in Kuala Lumpur probably runs into the hundreds of people.

“There certainly is more freedom for North Koreans to come and go. This has been the case for several years,” Mr. Green said. “It has been a popular place for North Korea to do business.”

There were 80 North Korean nationals working in the construction and mining industry in the Malaysian state of Sarawak, according to a Malaysian government report filed to the United Nations in August last year.

At least half a dozen Korean restaurants lie within a short distance of the North Korean embassy. The North Korean government opened the Pyongyang Koryo Restaurant there, staffed by waitresses brought in from North Korea.

And it was in Kuala Lumpur's airport that Kim Jong Un's half brother, Kim Jong Nam, met the attackers that allegedly ended his life.

Before his death on Monday, Kim Jong Nam, 45, was widely regarded as a more moderate voice in North Korea. But he had fallen out of favor with his father, Kim Jong Il, after attempting to enter Japan illegally to visit a Disneyland resort there in 2001, leaving the path clear for his younger half sibling, Kim Jong Un.

Kim Jong Nam, the half brother of North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, was killed under mysterious circumstances Monday. His criticisms of North Korea's regime in recent years may have made him a target. Photo: Getty Images

Police are still working to determine what happened to Kim Jong Nam, who they say was attacked by two women with a chemical liquid while waiting at the airport's terminal 2 for a flight to Macau. Police announced the arrest Wednesday of a woman holding a Vietnamese passport and said investigations were continuing.

Friendly zones such as Malaysia are potentially useful. In October, a small group of former U.S. diplomats and officials from Pyongyang held closed-door talks in Kuala Lumpur over North Korea's nuclear and missile programs. It was the latest in a periodic series of back-channel discussions that have also taken place in Singapore, Beijing and Berlin, among other locations.

“It is difficult to tell at this stage if there will be a diplomatic fallout from this incident,” said Wan Saiful Wan Jan, chief executive of the Institute for Democracy and Economic Affairs in Kuala Lumpur. “However, I think it is unlikely that the Malaysian or Chinese governments will allow this to escalate to a diplomatic row.” China is North Korea's most important ally.

The Malaysian government hasn't commented on the killing, referring all questions to the police.