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# TENSIONS ESCALATE

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Tit-for-tat orders  
bar citizens  
of both countries  
from leaving

THE NST TEAM  
KUALA LUMPUR  
news@nst.com.my

**T**ENSIONS between Malaysia and North Korea escalated yesterday in dramatic fashion when Pyongyang banned Malaysians from leaving the isolated country.

Soon after the hermit kingdom's decision, Malaysia imposed a similar ban on North Korean citizens in the country.

The North decided to "temporarily ban the exit of Malaysian citizens in the DPRK", the Korea Central News Agency reported, citing its Foreign Ministry.

The prohibition would remain in place "until the safety of the diplomats and citizens of the DPRK in Malaysia is fully guaranteed through the fair settlement of the case that occurred in Malaysia".

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak, in a blog post after chairing an emergency National Security Council meeting, said the focus now would be to ensure the safety of Malaysians in North Korea.

He promised that the government would do whatever necessary and possible to bring them back safely.

Najib chaired the meeting immediately upon his return from Jakarta yesterday evening.

Earlier in Jakarta, in an immediate reaction to news of North Korea's move, he called the travel ban tantamount to hostage-taking and added that he had given instructions that North Koreans be barred from leaving Malaysia.

"This abhorrent act, effectively holding our citizens hostage, is in total disregard for international law and diplomatic norms," he said after attending a summit of the Indian Ocean Rim Association.

There are 11 known Malaysians in North Korea. Four of them are embassy staff, five are family members of embassy staff and two are part of a United Nations food programme.

It has yet to be determined if there are other Malaysians in North Korea for business or leisure.

Tensions between both countries started rising when North



Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak speaking after a summit of the Indian Ocean Rim Association in Jakarta yesterday. BERNAMA PIC

Korean ambassador to Malaysia Kang Chol made disparaging remarks about Malaysia's handling of the investigations into the murder of Kim Jong-nam.

He was declared persona non grata and expelled.

Earlier yesterday, as foreign news agencies picked up the KCNA report, Malaysians began expressing outrage on cyberspace.

Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Ahmad Zahid Hamidi swiftly announced that North Korean embassy staff would not be allowed to leave the compound nor the country.

"We don't wish to retaliate, but this is what we have to do when a country with whom Malaysia has diplomatic ties with does something that is out of the diplomatic norm. Malaysia has no choice but to take the same action because they (North Korea) have manipulated the murder case that occurred at klia2."

Following the press conference, police teams were despatched to the North Korean embassy, where a cordon was set up at both ends of the road, manned by a dozen or so armed policemen in bullet-proof vests.

Patrol cars were also used to set up a barricade in front of the embassy's gates, barring anyone from leaving.

At least one attempt was made by embassy officials to leave, but the driver of the vehicle they were in headed back to the main entrance of the building after seeing the blockade.

Not long after that, the blockade was removed and embassy officials were allowed to leave.

Deputy Home Minister Datuk Nur Jazlan Mohamed said the barricade was only temporary, until the exact number of em-

bassy staff could be determined.

In **George Town**, Inspector-General of Police Tan Sri Khalid Abu Bakar said three North Koreans wanted in connection with Jong-nam's murder were holed up in the North Korean embassy.

He said police would wait for the three men to come out, even if it took five years.

Ironically, Pyongyang's decision yesterday did what few have managed — unite members of parliament from both sides of the political divide. Barisan Nasional and opposition members of parliament were united in supporting the government's handling of the issue.

Malaysia also received the support of the United States.

"We condemn in the strongest terms the use of chemical weapons. We urge North Korea to adhere to the Vienna Convention (on diplomatic relations)," said a US embassy spokesman.

The spokesman's reference to chemical weapons was based on the toxicology report on tests conducted on medico-legal samples taken from the remains of Jong-nam in which it was revealed that he had been killed with a dose of the highly-lethal VX nerve agent.

North Korea has rejected this finding and criticised Malaysian police's handling of the investigation. It also accused Malaysia of colluding with hostile nations, meaning South Korea and the US, and of going against international law and diplomatic convention.

Page 1 pic: Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak chairing an emergency meeting of the National Security Council at the Royal Malaysian Air Force base in Subang, Selangor, yesterday.