

Leader

‘...nothing in his life became him like the leaving it...’ *Macbeth, Act I, Scene IV*

So farewell Kim Jong-nam. Previously you were at best a footnote, at worst a joke – the half-brother that wasn’t able to sneak into Disneyland and got sent home in shame. Now your life will be remembered in thousands of PowerPoint presentations, a Tussauds type of fame, in the same room as Alexander Litvinenko. Traditionally the way to deal with brothers (and sisters) that posed a court threat was to have them strangled with a silk rope. Instead it looks like Kim Jong-un had you strangled from within, your body cramping as your respiratory muscles gave up the ghost.

I have to admit that VX was a surprise to the editorial office. A variety of chats had resulted in the smug conclusion, based on the extremely limited facts available, that it was likely to be a fentanyl derivative. We were looking for something that would cause a rapid inhalational onset of death, burns to the face and for which it would be very difficult to get an antidote. I and other armchair toxicologists felt jowl wigglingly secure in this diagnosis.

Some individuals suggested a kind of organophosphate (OP), one even went so far as to suggest VX! These people were clearly well meaning, but wrong-headed. The signs and symptoms of OP are such that diagnosis would be quite swift, a couple of doses of atropine would see Jong-nam back on his feet in no time. VX would also leave tell-tale clues, traces that would quickly be detected with conventional chemical detectors. The delay in announcing the identity of the agent clearly indicated that either something esoteric (tetradotoxin?) had been used or something that might normally be present in a body of a Macau frequenting playboy (like a heroin derivative).

The Victorian toxicology armchair now has been relegated to the back of the garage. VX. An agent that can only be manufactured via significant state facilities, the possession of which would not only definitively signal possession but also send a clear, negative signal to the world. The two girls that spread the agent on his face might well be ‘Lizard Tails’ (agents that can be cast off without loss), but at the same time represent a further source of forensic information and intelligence. What a mess.

Admittedly it was a plan so crazy it just might work. The Malaysian health authorities first thought that the death was a ‘heart stroke’ and nearly released the body to the DPRK authorities for cremation. This was largely due to Jong-nam travelling under a false name, so it seemed unlikely that the liquid rubbed over the face of a nobody had anything to do with the severe shortage of breath he faced. Only when South Korea stated that it was the prodigal son who had gone to sing with the bleedin’ choir invisible did counter terrorism and CBRN wheels start to turn.

How much the two girls involved in the attack knew is an area of intense speculation. From the grainy CCTV it doesn’t look as if the girl that spread the liquid on his face from behind was

wearing gloves, but she took care to wash her hands in the bathroom after. Police reports stated that one of the girls in custody was also vomiting heavily, though this was long after Jong-nam died. It’s a fact that KLIA2, the terminal where the attack took place, screens people before boarding, meaning that individuals who were airside had not been checked for liquids, etc.

It also seems that the Malaysian police are worryingly ignorant about VX, with it being described as a radioactive chemical (<http://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2017/02/24/cops-to-scour-klia2-after-vx-nerve-agent-found-on-jong-nam/>). Equally concerning is the matter of what decontamination has, or has not, been done on the area. Minute amounts of VX can be fatal, and when you consider that at least one of the girls will have touched the soap dispenser, that Jong-nam will have wiped his face and inevitably have left some on a seat, a bag, a desk... All that leaves a further contact hazard, and at the very least will have been cleaned with a rag held by someone else. I wonder how many of the cleaning staff at KLIA2 have been off work with raging headaches, runny noses and sensitivity to light? They also continued to use the airport after the attack!

What does this all mean?

1. DPRK is now confirmed to have VX, rather than merely being suspected of it.
2. DPRK will use ambassadorial channels to bring toxic substances into third countries.
3. DPRK informers/disidents are at significant risk.
4. Malaysian health authorities need increased training in CBRN.
5. Malaysian police authorities need more chemical detection equipment.

In reality, like the Litvinenko case, it doesn’t add up to a lot. States have always used assassination in other countries as a final means of asserting their authority (Gerald Bull and Supergun anyone? https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gerald_Bull#Assassination_and_legacy). They even use esoteric chemical, biological and radiological means to do so (fentanyl in the foiled Mishal assassination, <http://www.vanityfair.com/news/politics/2014/07/netanyahu-mishal-gaza-israel>) and this is not likely to change soon. The states involved traditionally hit the culprit’s regime with sanctions (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-38560439>) and life goes on as normal.

For DPRK sanctions won’t even register, their pariah status provides few levers of power against them (<http://thediplomat.com/2017/02/the-myth-of-a-north-korea-malaysia-special-relationship/>). For Malaysia and other countries, this has showcased the necessity of having a CBRN defence capability. If Jong-nam had been killed with an esoteric poison, then the 11 days needed to get full toxicology results is acceptable, for a known CWA you would hope that all clinical doubt would have been removed in about 24 hours. As is often the case, the inquiry will inevitably find that shortcomings need to be filled, that CBRN training needs to be improved... all too late to prevent Kim Jong-nam pushing up daisies.