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Terrorism Review (U)

10 March 1988

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Technical Trends

South/East Asia

North Korea

Gas Used in Suicide Attempts Following Korean Airliner Bombing

The attempted suicides of the two perpetrators of the Korean airliner bombing in November 1987 involved the use of hydrocyanic acid (HCN). The older terrorist, whose alias was Shinichi Hachiya, died. The younger, a female, survived the attempt and was extradited to South Korea. HCN is a gas at room temperature, unless encapsulated as a liquid under pressure in an airtight container—as it was in the ampules used by the perpetrators. In its gaseous state, HCN reacts in the body by interfering with the ability of tissue cells to metabolize oxygen, and it will kill a person almost instantaneously when ingested correctly. Once the ampule is broken, the HCN becomes a gas and must be inhaled quickly before it dissipates.

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