

Navy storms N. Korea 'heroin ship'

Monday, April 21, 2003 Posted: 0637 GMT (2:37 PM HKT)

SYDNEY, Australia (AP) -- A court refused bail Monday to 30 North Koreans arrested when the Australian navy stormed a ship allegedly involved in trafficking almost \$50 million worth of heroin.

The cargo ship, Pong Su, was intercepted Sunday by a navy warship after it refused police orders to stop off Australia's south coast. Troops boarded the ship using a helicopter and boarding vessels.

Police suspect the ship transported 50 kilograms (110 pounds) of heroin seized in the southeastern town of Lorne last week. Three men, from Malaysia and Singapore, were arrested last Wednesday and charged with importing heroin taken from the ship.

The body of another man was found on a beach after he apparently drowned while bringing drugs ashore.

A court in Sydney on Monday denied bail to the ship's North Korean captain and 29 crew, but police said they have not yet been charged. They were in police custody and due to appear in court on Tuesday.

Australian authorities impounded the 4,000-ton Pong Su, which is registered in the tiny Pacific island nation of Tuvalu.

After the navy stormed the ship on Sunday, Australian Prime Minister John Howard said the operation showed the government was determined to stop illegal drugs entering the country.

"This sends a clear signal to international drug traffickers that Australian authorities are determined to stop illegal import of drugs and will do whatever is necessary to ensure that the people responsible face the full force of Australian law," Howard said in a statement.

The three men arrested last week were Kiam Fah Teng, 45, and Yau Kim Lam, 44, both Malaysians, and Qwang Lee, 34, of Singapore.

They face possible life sentences if convicted of importing the heroin, which police said had a street value of Aust.\$80 million (U.S.\$48 million).

The origin of the drugs was not immediately clear.



Australian SAS troops board the vessel off Australia's east coast following a three-day chase.

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A gunner on the HMAS Stuart looks out to the North Korean-registered Pong Su.

In recent years, there have been frequent reports that opium, heroin and methamphetamines are produced in impoverished, communist North Korea, and that North Korean nationals are involved in trafficking drugs, particularly to Japan and Taiwan.