

Singapore rules US death a suicide, but suspicions linger

Singapore has invited the US to audit a firm to ensure the case of Shane Todd didn't involve secret technology transfer to China.

By Tom Benner, Contributor, Satish Cheney, Contributor / July 8, 2013



American engineer Shane Todd is seen in this undated handout photo.
Reuters/File

Singapore

Singapore authorities on Monday ruled the hanging death of American scientist Shane Todd last year was a suicide. State coroner Chay Yuen Fatt found that there was no foul play and that the 31-year-old Mr. Todd died by asphyxia due to hanging.

Todd's family immediately criticized the ruling as predetermined, and vowed to continue a high-profile campaign that has put Singapore's normally cordial relations with the United States under strain.

Todd was found hanged to death in his Singapore apartment in June 2012, days before he was to leave the country for good and return to the US. His parents in Montana have long rejected the possibility of suicide, instead believing their son died trying to stop a transfer of highly-sensitive military-grade technology from his employer, Singapore's Institute of Microelectronics (IME), to Huawei Technologies, suspected by some countries of enabling Chinese espionage with their devices.

The coroner's inquiry focused on the cause of death. Now the US and Singapore are faced with sensitive and diplomatically awkward questions about whether there was, in fact, a secret effort to transfer US export-controlled technology to a firm with suspected ties to the Chinese military.

(Read the Monitor's in depth Focus story on the mystery of Shane Todd and high tech secrets.)

Last March, trying to calm angry US officials threatening to cut off Defense Department funding to Singapore's IME, Singapore's Foreign Affairs and Law Minister, K Shanmugam, invited the US to participate in what he called an "audit," or investigation, into allegations of an illegal technology transfer. The two countries have to yet agree on the terms of the investigation.

"I see such an audit as having an assurance factor, particularly if it is led by the US-side and/or is independently conducted," says Eugene Tan, an assistant professor of law at Singapore Management University and a nominated member of Parliament.

While the US expects an investigation to be led by the Department of Commerce's Bureau of Industry and Security, Singapore will insist on its sovereignty in the case, Mr. Tan says. But he believes both countries have an interest in maintaining good relations.

"Both the US and Singapore have a good sense of what is at stake," Tan says. "Without suggesting that the larger interests will overwhelm the specific concerns of the case, both countries are not going to let this matter undermine the depth of the bilateral US-Singapore relationship."

Fallout

Veteran Singaporean political observer PN Balji says the investigation, while diplomatically sensitive, is unlikely to seriously hurt strong US-Singapore ties.

"The IME had already said there were no defense-related links with Huawei," Mr. Balji says. "Unless the US can prove otherwise it will be difficult to push the relationship downwards."

The ruling also is unlikely to hurt Singapore's ambitions to grow its defense-related industries. "The verdict will not have an impact on defense contracts. Singapore has been transparent," says Mano Sabnani, a former journalist turned financial expert.

However, lawyer and political observer Siew Kum Hong says while the IME audit will probably prove to be routine, there could be some fallout for the government-backed company.

"IME's reputation might suffer some damage from this incident," he says. "Other institutions and companies may just decide not to work with IME instead of taking the risk of any lasting adverse effects."

Following Monday's suicide finding, the US Embassy in Singapore released a carefully worded statement that avoided any mention of a further investigation into a possible

technology transfer. “The inquiry into Dr. Todd’s death was comprehensive, fair, and transparent,” the statement read.

The Todd family

To the Todd family, smooth US-Singapore relations are secondary to what happened to their son, and whether – as he reportedly told them – his life and US national security were at risk. The Todds worry that a conspiracy of complacency will win out over a search for what they consider the truth.

The family’s newly unveiled website, www.justice4shanetodd.com, is designed to counter what they see as misinformation from Singaporean officials. And they plan to lobby lawmakers in Washington, where Montana’s two US senators, Max Baucus and Jon Tester, have previously sought to cut some \$500,000 in Defense Department funding to Singapore’s IME while questions go unanswered.

“One must ask if Shane really committed suicide, why did the state and IME expend such an enormous amount of time, effort, and money to prove it? What do Singapore, IME, and Huawei have to hide?” the Todds said in a statement.

American Michael Dee, a permanent resident of Singapore and the former honorary Consul General for Singapore to Texas, said following Monday’s suicide verdict that American interests were not served by the coroner’s inquiry into Todd’s death.

“I grieve for Shane Todd’s family who have waited an unconscionable year for an unsatisfactory coroner’s report into their son’s death,” Mr. Dee says. “Singapore has a well-deserved reputation for safety. However, all Singapore residents should be deeply concerned as many open questions remain which do not reflect well on the process.”