

28 DISEMBER 2017

Australian grandma cleared of drug trafficking

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SHAH ALAM — An Australian grandmother who said she was tricked into smuggling drugs into Malaysia after falling for an online romance scam was yesterday cleared of trafficking, a crime punishable by death.

Maria Elvira Pinto Exposto was arrested in December 2014 at KL International Airport with 1.1kg of crystal methamphetamine stitched into the compartment of a backpack she was carrying.

The 54-year-old said she did not know about the hidden stash of "ice".

She said she had been fooled into carrying the bag after travelling to China to see someone she met online called "Captain Daniel Smith", who had claimed to be a US serviceman.

Anyone caught with at least 50gm of crystal meth is subject to the death penalty upon conviction.

Malaysian lawmakers voted last year to amend legislation so that capital punishment, carried out by hanging, is no longer mandatory in drug-trafficking cases — but the changes have not yet come into force.

Handing down his verdict at the High Court here, judge Ghazali Cha accepted the defence's argument that Exposto did not know the bag contained drugs and found her not guilty.

"I agree with the defence lawyer that the accused did not have knowledge about the drugs," he said.



Exposto arrives at the Shah Alam High Court ahead of the verdict in her drug hearing. — Picture by AFP

The judge indicated Exposto would be deported from Malaysia.

After engaging in a long online romance, Exposto had travelled to Shanghai to see "Smith".

But she did not succeed in meeting her supposed love interest while there and

ended up being given a bag by a stranger, who asked her to take it to Melbourne.

When she arrived at KL International Airport to change flights, she mistakenly went through immigration as she was unfamiliar with the airport.

She voluntarily offered her bags for

customs inspection and the drugs were discovered.

Two Australians were hanged in Malaysia in 1986 for heroin trafficking — the first Westerners to be executed in the country — in a case that strained relations.

— AFP