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Australian granny escapes the gallows

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> Judge rules woman did not know bag she was carrying contained drugs

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 the KL International Airport (KLIA) with 1.1kg of crystal methamphetamine stitched into a 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 50g of drugs is considered a trafficker in Malaysia, and is subject to the death penalty.

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 been implemented.

Judge Ghazali Cha accepted the defence's argument that Exposto did not know the bag contained drugs and found her not guilty at the High Court in Shah Alam.

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 KLIA 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.

There are numerous people on death row in Malaysia, mostly drug offenders, but executions have been rare in recent times. 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.