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Consortium Launched To Halt Militants' Fund Access

February 14, 2008



A consortium launched in Singapore on Tuesday aims to halt terrorists' access to funds, which could potentially reach up to \$3 million US dollars a month.



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The consortium was jointly launched by the Association of Banks in Singapore, the Singapore government and the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies.

The Consortium for Countering the Financing of Terrorism aims to strengthen co-operation between banks, government agencies and academia to cut off funding for extremist groups.

These groups include the Abu Sayyaf and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, which operate in the southern Philippines, as well as the Jemaah Islamiyah, which is based in South-east Asia.

With the launch of this new initiative, defence expert Professor Clive Williams from the Australian National University tells Michael Tan more about the agencies which have formed this consortium.

CW: I noticed that there is a range of different bodies involved, including financial intelligence areas, have been involved with the consortium in the lead-up to this launch, so there's a fair variety of different groups involved.

What kind of potential challenges do you fore-see in ensuring that militant groups are unable to retrieve funding for their operations?

CW: Well, I think that actually, Tang Seng Liang, who is a Singapore barrister and financial expert really put his finger on it when he said that criminals are looking for clean uses for dirty money and terrorists are looking for dirty uses for clean money and that's why I think it's been a problem for organizations like the FATF, the Financial Action Task Force, to actually achieve very much in the terrorism area. They've come up with a number of guide-lines and that sort of thing but the difficulty is that the amounts of money that terrorists are using are relatively small, it's clean money, often donated by charities or by individuals and that's very difficult to pick up on if you're looking for a transaction activity.

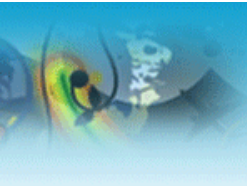
Militant groups like the Abu Sayyaf and the Jemaah Islamiyah move between two and three million US dollars a month to fund their activities in South-east Asia. Now, that is of course, a very large sum of money. How are these groups gaining access to such funds?

CW: Nonetheless of course, groups do use hawalah systems, you know the unregulated money systems and they're very hard to monitor particularly for funds going into the Philippines, and that's going to pose I think a significant difficulty. I think in Singapore, Singapore has got a reasonable handle on hawalah systems because traders have to be registered but I've heard varying reports about hawalah systems going into the Philippines and of course, the problem is with these systems is that 99% of the transactions are legitimate and necessary from people working over-seas who want to get money back to their families and so on, so it's not really an option to close them down, I think the US made a big mistake when it closed down one of the major systems going from Europe into Africa because that really created a lot of hard-ship. Eventually, they backed off from that but, the amounts of money are relatively small so they're very difficult to pick up on and I think that the problem is that terrorists also have a lot of other options and we see them for example using cash couriers and robbery if necessary as they did for the Bali 2002 bombing, a range of illegal activities such as narcotics trafficking and so on, in my mind, it's going to be very difficult to pick up on that kind of activity.

So what kind of avenues or facilities are terrorist groups exploiting to help transfer their funds?

CW: The use of cash couriers is becoming more of an issue because they're well

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aware now of electronic transfers, they're aware of thresh-holds. There have been cases where for example the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam have people working over-seas in places like Canada, Australia, the UK, going around collecting money so obviously they end up with larger sums, they're there-fore more vulnerable but if they instead get that money transferred through individuals back to family members that then get handed over back to places like Sri Lanka or the Philippines, that's a much more difficult issue to deal with, I don't think there's an easy answer to that.

Now that militant groups are going to find it that much harder to move their funds, what other avenues might these groups turn to to obtain their money and how prepared is the consortium in dealing with these potential problems?

CW: I think it's an extremely difficult problem, I don't think it's one that's very easily dealt with by the kind of organization you're talking about, charity money for example or Islamic zakat money, that's going to be very, very difficult to really regulate, money going out of the Middle East for building mosques and so on, very difficult to ensure that all that money is all accounted for, as I said, hawalah money, very difficult again, and in the Philippines for example, you can even pick up a hawalah payment from McDonald's, so it's a system that works very efficiently, more efficiently than banks I have to say, and I think it's going to be very difficult for financial intelligence units to pick up on those things. I think that the tip-off is not going to come from the financial transaction itself, it's going to come from other activities.

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