



INTERNATIONAL CENTRE FOR POLITICAL VIOLENCE AND TERRORISM RESEARCH

A Centre of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies

Spot Report on MAS SELAMAT KASTARI ARRESTED

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The Arrest

In the pre-dawn hours of 1 April 2009, 399 days after his escape from the high security facility of the Whitley Road Detention Centre (WRDC), Mas Selamat Kastari, head of Singapore's branch of the Jemaah Islamiah, was arrested by Malaysian Special Branch (MSB). Malaysia and Singapore's security agencies had joined forces in tracking him down and eventually nabbing him.¹



During the raid, Malaysia's police had closed on the traditional stilted house where Mas Selamat had been hiding, and shouting to him to surrender. A tense 30-minute stand-off ensued before officers forced their way in. Mas Selamat refused to give up easily. He clambered up to the second floor of the kampong house he was hiding in and tried to flee.²

Villagers said they saw Mas Selamat arrested by about 30 armed policemen. He was taken away with his head covered in a dark-blue checked sarong. He was wearing a T-shirt and shorts.³

¹ "Mas Selamat captured," The Straits Times, 8 May 2009.

² "Surrounded by police, Mas Selamat tried to flee from house," The Straits Times, 12 May 2009.

³ "Help from 2 Johor friends," The Straits Times, 10 May 2009

In a photograph taken just hours after his arrest shows that he had grown a thick beard and a thicker moustache, but otherwise, he looked similar to the photographs of him that had been distributed in Singapore. Mas Selamat, who was trained in firearms and explosives, was said to have been plotting attacks on Singapore, which the Malaysian authorities had detected and this had contributed to the success of his arrest.

The Escape

On 27 February 2008, Mas Selamat escaped from the Whitley Road Detention Centre, between 3.54 p.m. and 4.05 p.m.⁴ His escape sparked a nationwide manhunt. The Whitley Road Centre is high security detention facility for terrorist detainees in Singapore. His family was due to visit him that day, from 4.00 p.m. and 4.30p.m. At 3.30p.m., two Gurkha guards and a Special Duty Operative escorted him from his cell to a locker block where he was allowed to change into civilian clothes.

Once inside the locker room, he asked the guard for a curtain to change behind, but there were no curtains, so he stood behind a column of lockers to change. Unseen by the guards, he is believed to have put on at least two layers of clothing, emerging in light-yellow loose Malay shirt and greenish-grey trousers.

He was then taken to a visitation block, where at 3.45p.m., he entered a toilet to shave and comb his hair. He then entered a urinal cubicle, shut the door, flipped his trousers over a ledge above the cubicle door and turned on a tap inside to hide his subsequent movements. While the guards waited for him outside, he pushed open an unsecured ventilation window, squeezed through, and is believed to have used a vertical water pipe to climb down. Investigation found that he might have used seven rolls of toilet paper he had collected before hand to cushion his landing. He is believed to have climbed onto a roof of an enclosed walkway and jumped over a fence.

⁴ Report of the Committee of Inquiry on the Escape of Jemaah Islamiyah Detainee, Mas Selamat Bin Kastari, from the Whitley Road Detention Centre, 10 April 2008

Upon investigation, the escape took around 49 seconds when re-enacted.⁵

His escape was followed by a massive manhunt, first in the areas surrounding the detention centre, and then across Singapore. After the escape, Singapore had sought assistance from INTERPOL and an urgent worldwide security alert was activated. INTERPOL had issued an Orange Notice to each of its 189 National Central bureaus.

Mas Selamat became the most wanted terrorist in Singapore.

What had ensued after the escape?

After his successful escape from the Whitley Road Detention Centre, Mas Selamat was reported to lay hidden in several places in Singapore, all the time eluding the massive manhunt going on around him.⁶

On the night of the fourth day after he slipped out of WRDC, he reached Woodlands, in the northern coast of Singapore and swam more than 1.1 km across the Tebrau Strait towards Stulang Laut in Johor Baharu under the cover of darkness. He is said to have used an improvised floatation device. The buoy lights which mark the border at the Tebrau Strait became his guide to reach the place where he thought he could find a refuge.⁷

Despite the limp in his left leg, he had managed to reach Johor safely. The limp in his leg was resulted in his botched attempt to escape from prison when he was serving his 18-month in prison in Tanjung Pinang in Bintan, Indonesia for immigration offences in 2003. Mas Selamat had jumped from a window and broke his left leg.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ “Mas Selamat Used Buoy Lights As Guide As He Swam Across Strait” Bernama, Malaysian National News Agency, 10 May 2009
<http://www.bernama.com/bernama/v5/newsgeneral.php?id=410591>

⁷ Ibid

Once he arrived in Johor, he went to Ulu Tiram to find Abdul Matin Anol Rahmat, 60, who is believed to be a member of JI. Shortly after, he met with Johar Hasan, a JI sympathizer whom he had been staying with until his arrest.

It was reported that only these two of his friends were willing to come to his aid. All others shunned him away.⁸

Where had he been hiding?

Mas Selamat had been living a life of a simple villager in a tiny village called Kampung Tawakal in Skudai, southern Johor, where he rented the basement of a two-story wooden house on stilts. When he was arrested, Johar, the landlord of the house, and his wife, Riza, who lived upstairs with their three children, were also arrested.⁹



Mas Selamat was believed to have been staying in Johor all this time and had not traveled further north. It was reported that he had been living quietly in Johar's picturesque traditional stilted house which was surrounded by fruit trees.

Published photographs of the interior of the house showed that it was simply furnished with sofas, a punching bag and a shelf of books.

The owner of the house, Pak Sabar, who was Johar's father-in-law, said he did not know a terrorist had been harbored there. His house was being looked after by his daughter and son-in-law.¹⁰



⁸ "Help from 2 Johor friends", The Straits Times, 10 May 2009

⁹ "Tense Stand-off Before Arrest," The Straits Times, 12 May 2009

¹⁰ "No idea terrorist was in his house," The Straits Times, 13 May 2009

The village, called Kampong Tawakal, was about 10 kilometres off the North-South Highway near the Kempas exit. Kampong Tawakal nestles between oil palm plantations and the Berjaya industrial estate, with the Starhill Golf and Country Club a short distance away. However, is not marked on most maps and is difficult to find with no signboards pointing the way.

Prior to Mas Selamat's arrest, Kampung Tawakal had been a sleepy village with a small population of less than a hundred. His arrest resulted the village to be placed under a spotlight.

A villager who lived opposite Mas Selamat's home claimed that Mas Selamat never spoke to anyone and kept to himself. He also never prayed at the local mosque or village prayer room, though he would sometimes appear in public clad in a white robe and white turban.¹¹ Neighbors also said that he arrived around August 2008 and stayed at an un-numbered house.¹² Some villagers described him as aloof while others said he was easy to talk to and a respectful person who loved to fish at a nearby canal and barbeque his catch.

During his stay in the village, Mas Selamat did odd jobs and laid low, going with the name 'Bang Din' or Brother Din.¹³ In the morning he would work in the garden and planted banana trees, bitter gourd, peanuts and tapioca and bathed from a well nearby.¹⁴ In the evenings, he would fish with Johar's 12-year-old eldest son at a small river about 200m behind the house.

¹¹ Ibid

¹² "Mas Selamat hid in small village in Johor." Channel News Asia, 11 May 2009. http://www.channelnewsasia.com/cna/cgi-bin/search/search_7days.pl?status=&search=mas%2520selamat&id=428486

¹³ "Singaporean, Malaysian security officials to discuss terror attack." 11 May 2009

¹⁴ "Mas Selamat Hid in Small Village in Johor." May 11 2009, Channel News Asia.

What is next for Mas Selamat Kastari?

After his capture, Mas Selamat is currently being held by the Malaysian authorities in an undisclosed location for interrogation. He is detained under Malaysia's internal security act, which also allows for detention without trial.

Although it was not known when he would be handed over to the Singapore authorities, it had been reported that after the Malaysian had completed its interrogation, he would be brought back to Singapore and sent to the Whitley Road Detention Centre again. The Singapore government had had the facility's security features upgraded to prevent any future lapses.

There is still an ongoing debate on the actions that would be taken on Mas Selamat, and whether rehabilitation program would work on him. During his recapture, he was caught with two others while reportedly plotting another terrorist attack. His belligerence had cast doubts on his willingness to abandon his extremist inclinations.

However, as the authorities had previously stressed, the WRDC was designed to rehabilitate, and not punish, detainees. Some still believed that Mas Selamat deserves a chance in rehabilitation even though he should have his privileges taken away.

Nonetheless, despite the relief that Mas Selamat Kastari is once again in detention, the public was still reminded to stay vigilant and that the threat of terrorism was not yet over.