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Two-thirds of ISA detainees in S'pore released after rehabilitation

By S Ramesh, Channel NewsAsia | Posted: 24 February 2009 1435 hrs

SINGAPORE: Two-thirds of detainees arrested under the Internal Security Act (ISA) have been rehabilitated and released since the first arrests of the men who were linked to terrorist group, Jemaah Islamiyah, in 2001.

At an inaugural conference here on Tuesday, Singapore put the spotlight on the importance of rehabilitating terrorists.

There is no one-size-fits-all solution to tackle terrorism, said Law and Second Home Affairs Minister K Shanmugam. And the rehabilitation of terrorists is not getting the attention that is due.

"If you have a human bomb, the only way you can defuse that is to first remove them from harm's way... internalise that the path they are on is wrong and change. And you hope that with the right tools, psychological approach and religious approach, you achieve that," said Mr Shanmugam.

In Singapore, the detainees who have been released have not strayed back into terrorism. Even though they are re-integrated into society, they are being monitored closely.

Experts from abroad share that strong community support is important because those who turn to terrorism tend to be the ones left on the wayside.

Dr Omar Ashour, University of Exeter, United Kingdom, said: "(For) most of these members, if you looked at the causes of their radicalisation, part of that has to do with exclusion, lack of employment, unacceptance by society. So if they were not re-integrated properly, they risk radicalisation."

Several speakers at the two-day conference come from countries which are currently terrorist hotbeds and have seen deadly attacks over the past few years.

One such hotspot is Iraq, where nearly 26,000 Iraqis were in detention. The two types of detainees that officials had to deal with were those who were already radicalised and those who were radicalised while in detention.

Major General Douglas Stone, United States Marine Corps in Iraq, said: "During the time that we were there, we were able to reduce the recidivism rate significantly - often because we were able to determine who were the violent Islamist extremists, separate them, work them with the rest of the population in programmes like education. And with about 160 Imams, we had to work with them to understand the good teachings of the Muslim faith."

In Singapore, that role is fulfilled by the Religious Rehabilitation Group which counsels detainees and educates the community about the dangers of terrorist ideas.