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Freed terror detainees fit well in society

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Rehabilitation efforts effective; none has slipped back into bad old ways

TWO-THIRDS of Singapore's terrorist detainees arrested since 2001 have been released after rehabilitation, and so far, none has strayed back into terrorism.

Close to 40 men with past terror links have been released and have returned to society, some for four years or more.

Another 20 remain in detention.

Those who have been released have re-integrated well into society, Law Minister and Second Minister for Home Affairs K. Shanmugam said yesterday at the first international conference on terrorist rehabilitation to be held here.

Addressing 200 participants from 20 countries, Mr Shanmugam said the conference is 'timely'. Rehabilitation is a critical part of counter-terrorism but has not received the necessary attention internationally, he added.

During the three-day conference, much of which is closed-door, government officials and experts will share case studies from such countries as Iraq, Egypt, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Uzbekistan and Indonesia.

Officials from Thailand, the Philippines, Pakistan and Bangladesh will also talk about rehabilitation programmes that they hope to put in place and the challenges they are facing.

The event is organised by the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, and a group of volunteer Islamic teachers and scholars who make up the Religious Rehabilitation Group.

One major challenge to current rehabilitation efforts is the lack of a foolproof way to assess whether a terrorist has been truly reformed, Mr Shanmugam said.

That is why in Singapore, released detainees must continue to attend a rehabilitation programme that aims to inoculate them against radical ideas.

The authorities here do not ever declare success but know they 'will always have to remain alert', he added.

Singapore's track record compares well against that of other countries. About one in 10 of those released from the United States' detention facility in Guantanamo Bay is either known or suspected to have returned to terrorist activity.

Saudi Arabia has re-arrested slightly over 1 per cent of its released former detainees for security offences.

While explaining that Singapore takes a holistic approach that incorporates psychological and religious aspects in rehabilitation, Mr Shanmugam also stressed that there can be no one-size-fits-all solution which will be effective across the globe.

'Every country has its unique security, cultural and social context, and the factors which lead people to and away from terrorism also differ from one country to the next,' he said.

Conference speaker Douglas Stone said a key lesson from Iraq was that physical detention alone could lead to greater radicalisation if the underlying motivations for terrorism were not addressed.

A former deputy commanding general of the multinational force in Iraq, Dr Stone was in charge of detainees there from April 2007 to June 2008.

Psychologist Michele Gelfand, of the University of Maryland in the US, said researchers are working on an index to measure the extent of a detainee's deradicalisation, by studying such factors as his approval of violence and perception of justice towards Muslims.

Professor Rohan Gunaratna, who heads the terrorism research centre here, praised Singapore's rehabilitation programme as the most systematic in the world.

'They take a very long-range view, and invested significant intellectual and other resources to study the best practices,' he said.

Mr Shanmugam also launched a web portal, www.P4Peace.com, developed by the research centre to provide a one-stop source of information on counter-terrorism.

It also aims to promote discussion on peaceful alternatives to terror, and thereby spark a counter-movement to the spread of terrorist ideas online.

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