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Agitated by one who got away

Patrick Walters, National security editor | March 08, 2008

IT has sparked the biggest manhunt in Singapore's history and caused huge embarrassment to the country's usually super-efficient security agencies.

Eleven days ago, Jemaah Islamiah leader Mas Selamat Kastari managed to give his guards the slip and vanished from Singapore's high-security Whitley Road detention centre. Yesterday thousands of Singaporean police and defence personnel were still searching densely forested areas on the island for Mas Selamat. Patrol boats were plying the Johore Strait and the waterways leading to the neighbouring Indonesian island of Batam.

When he disappeared soon after 4pm on February 27, Mas Selamat, who walks with a pronounced limp, was due to meet his family at the detention centre where he had been held for the past two years. Singapore authorities won't say whether Mas Selamat scaled a fence or walked out through the front gates of the Whitley Road complex. Two official investigations, including an independent probe by a retired judge, have now been launched into the dramatic circumstances of his escape.

The official line is that Mas Selamat acted alone and is still at large on the island. But security experts say he would have needed only a couple of hours to get to Malaysia or to Batam with the aid of accomplices.

Mas Selamat's disappearance has thrown the spotlight back on JI in Southeast Asia and Singapore's handling of the threat posed by Islamic extremists. Before his arrest in Indonesia in 2006, Mas Selamat was a senior figure in JI who once considered flying a plane into Singapore's Changi airport.

According to Singapore authorities, he met al-Qa'ida's Southeast Asia chief Riduan Isamuddin, better known as Hambali, in 2001 at a crucial planning meeting which eventually led to the 2002 Bali bombings in which 88 Australians died. After spending time in Afghanistan in the mid-1990s, Mas Selamat became the head of JI's Singapore cell and developed links with other JI leaders, including Noordin Mohamed Top, the organisation's bombing mastermind in Java.

Mas Selamat was interrogated by Indonesian police in 2002 but authorities had no knowledge then of his close involvement with JI. After being picked up in Indonesia two years ago, Mas Selamat was extradited to Singapore and detained under the country's wide-ranging Internal Security Act.

In January 2002, Singapore conducted the first big strike against JI when authorities swooped on the local JI cell, which had secretly planned to bomb Western embassies and attack Changi airport, and arrested 31 people. The Singapore operation was the first of dozens of counter-terrorism operations across Southeast Asia and Australia.

Six years later, Singapore government experts assert that JI's operations on the island state have been dismantled. A total of 28 JI members remain in detention and 31 have been released since the initial wave of arrests in 2002.

The biggest fear for Singapore's security agencies at home is the threat of self-radicalisation among the island's 400,000-strong Muslim population, with Islamist websites being a key motivator.

In late January, three young men were arrested in connection with suspected terrorist

activity. This followed the June 2007 detention of lawyer Abdul Basheer Abdul Kader, who was allegedly influenced by extremist ideology via the internet.

The Singapore Government has invested heavily in building communal links with its large Muslim minority, which makes up about 14 per cent of the population. A Religious Rehabilitation Group consisting of respected Muslim clerics offers counselling services to JI detainees and their families. The Islamic Religious Council of Singapore has also opened a Harmony Centre in the city as a key educational tool to educate Singaporeans about the true tenets of Islam.

Mohammed Ali, a Muslim cleric and academic researcher, and one of the key figures in the rehabilitation of JI detainees, tells Inquirer that a lot of positive progress has been made in influencing hardline JI members away from their extremist views. More than 10 JI members have been released from detention since 2005 as a result of the efforts of the Muslim elders.

"You sit down one-on-one and listen to them and then identify how they have misinterpreted Koranic verses," Ali says. He warns that despite the obvious operational successes against JI and al-Qa'ida in recent years, the latter is still a formidable ideological tool when it comes to influencing younger generations of Muslims.

Singapore's counter-terrorism agencies tell Inquirer that most concern about JI is now focused on The Philippines and Indonesia. The assessment is that the threat from JI in Malaysia is low, with Kuala Lumpur also applying tough internal security laws against JI operatives.

One of the growing worries for Singapore is the growing Muslim insurgency in southern Thailand, now the most active conflict zone in Southeast Asia, in which 2400 people have died in the past six years. Although there is no evidence yet of direct JI or al-Qa'ida involvement in the violence, Singapore analysts say Muslim groups in Thailand's three southernmost provinces are building support networks across the border with Malaysia, and Indonesian jihadis have also travelled to the region.

Rohan Gunaratna of Singapore's S.Rajaratnam School of International Studies acknowledges Australian expertise has been pivotal to blunting JI as a terrorist force in Southeast Asia but warns the group remains a potent threat, with an estimated 400 members still at large in Indonesia.

"Today in Southeast Asia the threat is ideologically driven and group affiliation is less significant," he contends.

Gunaratna says this demands a more strategic approach to fighting terrorism from Australia and Indonesia. Indonesia must proscribe JI as a terrorist organisation and put JI spiritual leader Abu Bakar Bashir back in prison, he argues.

"The Indonesians have been very successful in dismantling Noordin Top's JI faction. But the strategic threat to Indonesia is coming from Abu Bakar Bashir. Basically they must revamp their national security legislation and re-try Bashir.

"As long as a terrorist group is not proscribed it can operate, raising funds and recruiting personnel and carrying on with its agenda of radicalisation."

On Australia's part the Rudd Government must develop a more dynamic partnership with Muslim leaders and the Muslim community, Gunaratna says. "The threat has been managed very well and the threat has been contained very well. What you must build in Australia is support for Muslim organisations like Singapore's Religious Rehabilitation Group.

"The bigger threat you will face in Australia in the coming years won't be from JI but from

other (home-grown) groups, including those 200-odd (individuals) who have travelled overseas for indoctrination and training," he says.

Patrick Walters has just returned from Singapore, where he interviewed local officials.

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