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Analysts hope for intelligence bonanza from Indonesian raids

JAKARTA - INDONESIAN police have dealt another hammer blow to Southeast Asia's most feared terror network with raids that yielded 10 suspects and a safe house full of bombs and computers, analysts said.

Terrorism experts told AFP this week's arrests appeared to have stopped a dangerous cell with regional links which was poised to launch a massive attack, probably against Western tourists on the island of Sumatra.

Police said the men arrested around the South Sumatra provincial capital of Palembang were connected to fugitive Malaysian extremist Noordin Mohammad Top, the alleged mastermind of the 2002 Bali bombings who calls himself leader of Al-Qaeda for the Malay Archipelago.

The arrests are likely to lead US and Australian-trained anti-terrorism investigators to a trove of intelligence about Noordin's extreme faction of the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) network and its links to Singapore and Malaysia.

'JI is fragmented and the consensus seems to be that the group was focused on Java and had gone back to basics' since Indonesian police began their crackdown in 2002, said Singapore-based terrorism analyst Dr John Harrison.

'So it's important that there has been a fairly significant find in South Sumatra which means that they have a bigger reach than we had anticipated.'

Dr Harrison, the head of the Terrorism Unit at the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research in Singapore, said the discovery of 18 computer hard-drives was a potential bonanza for investigators.

'It looks like this (cell) is fairly significant and it could be very significant depending on what they find on those computers. It would suggest that this was a very large operation.'

The arrests are the most significant blow to JI, which grew out of radical religious schools in Java island, since the capture of senior leaders Abu Dujana and Zarkasi in June last year.

'It's significant that it's in Sumatra because that is closer to the whole Mantiqi One division in Malaysia and Singapore,' said Mr Sidney Jones of the International Crisis Group, referring to JI's internal structure.

'All of the people that have been involved in bombings have been from that network.'

Raids on a rented house in Palembang turned up around 20 homemade bombs, including several powerful 'tupperware bombs' which police reportedly said had the potential to cause carnage on the scale of Bali.

The bombings at crowded tourist night-spots on the resort island of Bali eight years ago which killed 202 people, mostly foreigners, were the most deadly of a string of JI attacks blamed on Noordin's network.

Police have mentioned a tourist cafe in Bukittinggi, West Sumatra, and unspecified locations in Jakarta as

targets of interest for the Pelambang cell which was broken up with a series of arrests between Saturday and Wednesday.

Analysts said the suspects could lead investigators to Noordin, who is still on the run even as his most loyal deputies have been captured or killed by Indonesian police since 2002.

The cell was also likely to yield information on other fugitives including Mas Selamat bin Kastari, JI's alleged emir in Singapore who escaped from prison there on February 27 and is still at large, reportedly in Indonesia.

One of the detainees is understood to be Abu Hazam, also known as Omar and Taslim, a Singaporean national and associate of Kastari who received military training in Afghanistan and reportedly has met Al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden.

Police said he was the master bomb-maker in the cell, a craft he learnt from Azahari Husin, a JI explosives expert and Noordin loyalist who was killed in a police raid in East Java in 2005.

The Kompas daily reported Friday that Hazam had met Noordin on numerous occasions but police gave no details on the alleged links between the two men.

Analysts applauded the Indonesian police for the apparent success of the operation in Palembang but said round-ups of JI members only 'bought time' for civil society to tackle the larger threat of radical Islam.

'This highlights that although the kinetic energy in terms of law enforcement is very important and in this case may have saved hundreds of lives, there is still the need to attack the ideology that drives these groups,' Dr Harrison said. -- AFP

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