

Jun 19, 2010

Beware terror recruiters, KL undergrads told

Malaysian police chief warns varsity students as terror plots come to light

By Carolyn Hong, Malaysia Bureau Chief



The Kek Lok Si Temple in Penang has asked the police to set up a post there after learning about the terrorist threats. -- PHOTO: TOURISM MALAYSIA

KUALA LUMPUR: Malaysian police chief Musa Hassan has warned university students against falling prey to terrorist recruiters.

The matter came to light after nine foreign students were arrested earlier this year on suspicion of recruiting local students.

'We want people to be alert to the activities that are aimed at recruiting the young so that they can help us nip the problem in the bud,' Tan Sri Musa told The Star newspaper yesterday.

He said operatives from the regional militant group Jemaah Islamiah (JI) were found trying to recruit 20 students before they were arrested. But he said the group was not linked to any political party in Malaysia.

The nine foreigners from Nigeria, Syria, Jordan and Yemen were allegedly plotting to blow up two temples in Penang and Selangor when they were arrested in January. They were deported in April.

Their leader was believed to be Aiman Al Dakkak, a 45-year-old Syrian who was a doctorate student at Universiti Sains Malaysia in Penang at the time.

They are among the thousands of foreign students who have been flocking to Malaysia in growing numbers in the past 10 years.

According to the Higher Education Ministry, there are now more than 80,000 foreign students in the country's public and private universities, up from 28,000 in 2002.

More than a quarter of them - 23,000 - are from the Middle East, predominantly Iran, Yemen and Saudi Arabia.

Professor Aziz Bari, from the International Islamic University, which attracts many foreign students, said they make up an important group now that universities are required to raise at least 30 per cent of its own financial needs.

'The universities and the country need the revenue,' he said.

Lecturer Azmi Shahrom from Universiti Malaya, said foreign students are being wooed because they can help boost the university's international ranking.

But both he and Prof Aziz are sceptical of the police claims on terrorist recruitment in local universities.

Mr Azmi said although there are concerns about the quality of the students, most of them are genuine about their studies.

'There may be a need for better monitoring by the immigration (authorities), but I'm not convinced by the claims,' said Prof Aziz.

Professor Rohan Gunaratna, from the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research in Singapore, said Malaysia should maintain its open policy but that students should be screened periodically.

'It's only the fringe of a fringe group of students, but it's important to stay vigilant,' he said, adding it is known that JI now focuses on infiltrating universities instead of religious schools.

Saying he believed the threat to be real, Prof Gunaratna said Malaysia did the right thing operationally. He suggested that it should consider setting up units to fight radicalisation and foster tolerance and moderation.

Meanwhile, several places of worship have asked for increased security following media reports of the terrorist threats.

'I was shocked after reading about the threat,' the chairman of the Sri Subramaniam Swamy Devas Thanam Temple, Mr R. Nadarajah, told The Star.

The temple in Batu Caves, Selangor, is a famous tourist attraction, and important to the Hindu community.

The management of the Kek Lok Si Temple in Penang has asked the police to set up a post there.

Penang Chief Minister Lim Guan Eng assured the people that police patrols have been increased.

The state has the most temples in Malaysia.

carolynh@sph.com.sg

PREVENTIVE MEASURE



'We want people to be alert to the activities that are aimed at recruiting the young so that they can help us nip the problem in the bud.'

Malaysian police chief Musa Hassan

CLAIMS DOUBTED

'There may be a need for better monitoring by the immigration (authorities), but I'm not convinced by the claims.'

Professor Aziz Bari of the International Islamic University, who is sceptical about police claims that terrorist recruitment is happening in local universities