

Cyber warriors trawl web for extremist threats

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SINGAPORE (AFP) - Nur Azlin Mohamed Yasin spends several hours a day trawling the Internet, but she is not your typical young surfer, descending into a world of bomb-making, militancy and extremism.

From her computer, she enters a world where young Muslims openly volunteer to fight against US-led coalition troops in Afghanistan or learn how to make explosives out of everyday materials.

The 24-year-old Singaporean research analyst is constantly on the lookout for attack manuals, video clips of Islamist militants in training and fiery extremist chatter that could hint at an imminent assault somewhere.

It is a place where Al-Qaeda terror network chief Osama bin Laden is venerated and the three Indonesian men executed for their role in the Bali bombings of 2002 are held up as poster boys for would-be recruits.

"This whole thing is worrying," she told AFP in an interview, referring to a growing trend of individuals imbibing radical ideas online.

Nur Azlin is one of five research analysts at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies who monitor extremist websites daily to get a sense of an emerging battleground in the fight against terrorism.

All of them happen to be women and their collective skills include knowledge of Arabic, Bahasa Malaysia, Bahasa Indonesia -- and geopolitical issues.

"After you sit down, think about it and do a trend analysis, you say 'Oh my God! this is really happening,'" said Nur Azlin, who works for the school's International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research.

"You can see the radicalisation process unfold online."

There are an estimated 5,500-6,000 websites worldwide peddling extremist ideas, according to the researchers, who work from a spartan office in a suburban university campus.

Nur Azlin is tasked to monitor and analyse websites in Southeast Asia, a region that hosts notorious organisations such as the Jemaah Islamiyah movement and the Abu Sayyaf group operating in the southern Philippines.

She estimates that there are around 192 extremist websites in the region, many of them individual blogs which have mushroomed since early 2008 when Internet blogging became popular.

Singapore, a staunch US ally and international finance centre, considers itself a prime target for terrorist attacks like last month's deadly hotel bombings in Jakarta aimed at symbols of Western influence.

Home Affairs Minister Wong Kan Seng has warned that "self-radicalised" individuals have emerged as a new security threat.

In 2007, Singapore announced the arrest of five suspected Islamic militants, among them local law lecturer Abdul Basheer Abdul Kader, who allegedly planned to pursue "jihad" in Afghanistan after getting radical ideas from the Internet.

When analyst Nur Azlin started monitoring the websites in early 2007, most of the content was in the form of articles urging Muslims to fight back against perceived oppression, she recalled.

They were usually accompanied by photos like a child allegedly maimed during an attack by coalition forces in Afghanistan or by Israeli troops in Palestine.

In late 2007, computer hacking manuals started to appear on Southeast Asian websites, uploaded by individuals in online forums, she said.

Forum participants, some of whom identified themselves as undergraduate students from Indonesia and Malaysia, urged each other to hack websites they considered to be promoting liberal Muslim views.

"By early 2008, we started to see bomb-making manuals and bomb-making videos," Nur Azlin recalled.

With the appearance of these manuals -- taken from Arabic websites -- the reaction from forum participants got more virulent, as they goaded each other to take action rather than stay passive supporters or sympathisers, she said.

In one of the exchanges, participants tried to organise arms training but some said they did not have money to buy AK-47 assault rifles, Nur Azlin said.

A group called "Indonesian Airsoft Mujahideen" stepped in and offered to facilitate their training using air rifles and paintball machines, which are widely used for play sessions at corporate training seminars in Asia.

"They would rent the place much like a team-building activity," Nur Azlin said. "They used this training in the meantime that they don't have their AK-47s."

Jolene Jerard, 26, a manager at the centre, said the analysts compile a monthly report about their findings.

The extremist videos they download -- now in high definition and professionally taken compared with the grainy amateurish clips of the past -- are put into a database, one of the biggest collections in Southeast Asia.

The centre shares its findings and analyses with the relevant government authorities and foreign diplomats visit the school for briefings.

"The cyberdomain is an area where governments have been gradually moving into," Jerard said.

"It's a changing threat landscape. I think it is increasingly becoming important and governments are definitely enthusiastic about countering it and putting enough resources in place."