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DIY extremists a 'worrying trend'

Security analysts, religious leaders call for greater efforts to inoculate Muslims against online radical ideology

By Zakir Hussain

THE latest arrests of three youths for terror-related activities signal that the trend of do-it-yourself (DIY) extremists is a worrying one, said security analysts and religious leaders yesterday.

They urged the community to intensify efforts to inoculate Muslims here against radical ideology readily available online.

Such ideas from the Internet had nurtured a new group of what has been termed 'self-radicalised' youth. And these ideas are not going to go away any time soon, said the analysts and religious leaders.

They were commenting on the detention of two young men who had been self-radicalised as early as 2003, developing their views through militant publications, videos and websites.

But they appeared to have been found out much later while planning to engage in terrorism abroad.

Muhammad Zamri Abdullah and Maksham Mohd Shah, both 26, were detained under the Internal Security Act last month.

Both had travelled overseas to try to join militant networks and take up arms and were prepared to die as martyrs in places like Afghanistan, Palestine and Chechnya, the Home Affairs Ministry said yesterday.

A third person influenced by the duo, Mohammad Taufik Andjah Asmara, 26, was given a Restriction Order which limits his activities.

Terrorism expert Rohan Gunaratna believes the growing trend of DIY, home-grown extremists, such as these men, will be the 'dominant threat' to Singapore in the foreseeable future.

Even though transnational networks linked to Al-Qaeda, such as the Jemaah Islamiah, have been weakened, the concepts and ideology of such groups are easily available online, said Dr Gunaratna.

He is the head of the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research at the Nanyang Technological University.

Analysts estimate there are about 6,000 radical websites.

But what is of greater concern to many is the time lag before these DIY radicals are found out.

It is almost impossible to detect them until they take steps to put their ideas into practice by preparing to take up arms, said Ustaz Mohamed Ali, an associate research fellow at the centre at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies.

Ustaz Mohamed, who is also a member of the Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG) which counsels such detainees, believes the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 could have a factor in turning them into radicals, as it has been for many young Muslims worldwide.

'The worrying question is how many others here have been indoctrinated with similar ideas, and how many will translate their ideas like these ones have?' he said.

Ustaz Mohammed Suhaimi Mohamed Fauzi, executive imam of the Al-Istighfar Mosque in Pasir Ris and an RRG member too, believes the answer lies with Muslim community leaders continuing their efforts to inoculate young Muslims from radical beliefs that purport to be Islamic.

'A good reason to be optimistic is that many of the JI detainees have now changed their views,' he said.

In a statement, the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (Muis) supports the firm action taken by the security agencies. The trio had been misled 'through unsupervised learning of Islamic teachings from radical propaganda in publications, videos and the Internet,' said its president Alami Musa.

Stressing the importance of learning Islam from credible sources, he said Muis had a portal on radical ideologies to guide Muslims here.

He also advised Muslim families to be vigilant concerning where their young learn about Islam, and the websites they frequent.

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