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JAKARTA - With the execution early Sunday of three Indonesian militants behind the 2002 Bali bombings, the focus is shifting to the hunt for a radical militant leader who allegedly masterminded the carnage.

Noordin Mohammed Top, a Malaysian-born fighter believed to be leading a radical faction of the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) regional network, has been the subject of a police manhunt since 2002.

Noordin was allegedly a key player behind some of JI's bloodiest attacks, including the 2002 bombings that killed over 200 mainly foreign tourists, and his continued run from police has cast a shadow over successful Indonesian efforts to wind back the network.

His arrest would help to decapitate the jihadi group, which has failed to stage a spectacular attack since a second set of bombings that killed 20 people in Bali in 2005.

But it would only be a start. Top militants including bomb experts Dulmatin and Umar Patek have evaded capture and are widely believed to be in the southern Philippines.

Zulkarnaen, reportedly the Al-Qaeda pointman in Southeast Asia, also remains on the run.

While Noordin's network of fighters has been decimated -- and the majority of JI has

turned its back on his ruthless style -- he is likely hiding with the protection of JI acolytes within Indonesia, analyst Noor Huda Ismail told AFP.

"It's still the ideology of JI members to protect their guests, especially fighter guests, even if they don't agree with their actions," Ismail said.

"In fact, a majority of them don't agree with the bombings but they agree that the enemy is the US and its allies," he said, adding that Noordin is likely on the move but not far from JI strongholds on Java island.

The long six-year hunt for Noordin has produced a steady flow of tantalizing near-misses.

In October 2003 Noordin and his Malaysian master bomb maker Azahari Husin fled from a police raid on their rented hideout in Bandung city, West Java.

He escaped arrest again when the police raided several homes in Central Java in October 2005, and in November the same year.

Local media in March also reported Noordin narrowly evaded capture in East Java after seeking treatment for a liver illness.

However, the head of the elite Special Detachment 88 anti-terror squad, Usman Nasution, denied the report to AFP.

"Those reports are unverified. Whether he's in Java or Sumatra, we don't know. He could be anywhere. We can't say more as this case is highly confidential," Nasution said.

A string of recent police arrests have raised hopes that police are closing in on Noordin, analysts said.

A police raid in and around Jakarta late last month is set to lead to charges against one militant believed to be linked to Noordin ally Husin, who was shot dead by police.

Interrogations of other alleged JI militants, including 10 members of an alleged cell arrested in July in the Sumatran city of Palembang, have also helped police follow Noordin's trail.

Noordin's elusive movements, and his ability to plot attacks, have been strongly curtailed by the arrests, Singapore-based terrorism expert and analyst John Harrison said.

"He may try to camouflage himself, like changing clothes and using different types of hair color. But since he's high-profile, camouflage isn't likely to work in the long haul, it will just buy him time if he's questioned by a police officer," Harrison said.

"More likely, he's remaining among his support network to keep himself out of the public eye."

"Noordin Top has become more discrete in his meetings," said Rohan Gunaratna, another

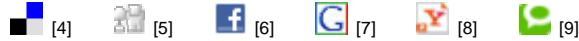
Singapore-based analyst.

"The security environment has restricted his mobility and contact with others, many of his associates have been arrested or killed, and his network has diminished," Gunaratna said.

However, Noordin has managed to keep organizing attacks and has set up working links with a number of Indonesian militant organizations.

"Noordin Top poses a significant threat to Indonesia and the region," Gunaratna said.

as of 11/09/2008 4:05 PM



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