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Indonesia Arrests Prominent Cleric

By **PATRICK BARTA**



Agence France-Press/Getty Images

Special police escort Abu Bakar Bashir, arrested on suspicion of aiding a new radical Islamist cell, to police headquarters in Jakarta on Monday.

The arrest of Indonesia's best-known radical Islamic cleric marks the latest effort by authorities to halt the spread of new terrorist networks in Southeast Asia. But it also is a reminder that for all of Indonesia's antiterrorism success in recent years, authorities still haven't delivered a mortal blow to alleged militant groups that analysts fear could continue to threaten the region.

Police arrested 71-year-old Abu Bakar Bashir in West Java Monday morning on suspicions that he assisted in developing a new jihadi cell in Indonesia's Aceh province.

Authorities had disrupted the group in a series of raids earlier this year in which more than 20 suspected leaders were arrested or killed, but some of its members remain at large and

authorities continue to warn of possible attacks. Police said Mr. Bashir was actively involved in establishing the network and provided financial support.

Radical Indonesian Cleric Arrested

1:39

Radical cleric Abu Bakar Bashir was arrested for connections to Islamist military training camps and planned terror attacks. Video courtesy of Reuters.



Five other suspects were rounded up Sunday, the Associated Press reported, and police said they have seized large caches of assault weapons, ammunition and explosives. Police also said they had discovered a bomb-making laboratory in Cibiru, a village 110 miles (about 180 kilometers) southeast of the capital.

Mr. Bashir has repeatedly denied involvement in terrorist activities and maintained he is being singled out for his efforts to

promote Islamic law in Indonesia. He repeated those denials as he was hauled into national police headquarters on Monday.

"The United States is behind this!" he shouted, the AP reported. "This arrest is a blessing. ... I will be rewarded by Allah!"

A spokesman for the U.S. embassy in Jakarta said it had no comment on the arrest. Efforts to reach Mr. Bashir's lawyer were unsuccessful. Police have one week to file official charges.

Jakarta's move was interpreted by intelligence analysts as a sign that authorities are growing more ambitious in their multiyear campaign to stamp out Islamic radicalism in the country, the world's fourth-largest with 240 million people.

Mr. Bashir has long been regarded as a spiritual leader of Jemaah Islamiyah, a terror group with links to al Qaeda that aims to create an Islamic state across much of Southeast Asia and that carried out attacks against nightclubs, embassies and hotels in Indonesia in the past decade, killing more than 200 people. He also co-founded an influential Islamic boarding school in Indonesia in the 1970s that educated several Indonesians later convicted of terrorist acts.

Still, authorities have failed repeatedly to prove their most serious charges against Mr. Bashir, despite two earlier arrests over the past decade. Although he served several years in prison for lesser convictions, including conspiracy in relation a 2002 attack on the resort island of Bali that killed 202 mostly Western tourists, he was released in 2006 and Indonesia's Supreme Court later overturned his conviction in the Bali case.

Mr. Bashir maintained a relatively low profile after his release and resumed work at his school in Central Java. But he continued to lecture across the country and remained critical of the U.S., which he described as a "state terrorist." More recently, he formed a new above-ground Islamic group, Jemaah Ansharut Tauhid, which publicly renounced violence and focused on promoting religious education and the imposition of Shariah law in Indonesia.

Intelligence experts suspected the group had ties to violent extremists, however. In May, authorities arrested three JAT members for allegedly raising money for Aceh-based activities, which included an Islamic-militant training camp. The cell is accused of planning to attack Jakarta hotels and embassies along the lines of a brazen siege in Mumbai in 2008 that killed 166 people. It is also linked to unsuccessful plans to assassinate Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono.

Mr. Bashir "played an active role" in preparing the group's plans, said police spokesman Maj. Gen. Edward Aritonang.

"They would not have picked him up this time unless they really had the goods," said Sidney Jones, an Indonesia expert for the International Crisis Group, a Brussels-based think tank. "You do not take on something this high-profile" after twice failing to score a major conviction before, she added.

An Asia-based intelligence official said Indonesian investigators are confident they have identified a money trail linking Mr. Bashir and his group to the alleged terrorists arrested in Aceh earlier this year. "They think they can make this stick," he said, on condition of not being identified.

Terrorism experts were divided on how important Mr. Bashir's arrest would be in the long run. Indonesian authorities have arrested or killed scores of alleged terrorists in recent years, and the frequency of attacks has declined, leading many analysts to conclude the government is succeeding in its war against radicalism.

"Terrorism won't end with Bashir, but if he is charged and tried and sentenced, it will be very difficult to replace" him, said Rohan Gunaratna, head of the International Center for Political Violence at Singapore's Nanyang Technological University. He described Mr. Bashir as "the most important terrorist in Southeast Asia."

But Ms. Jones said elements of the Aceh cell remain at large. Even if Mr. Bashir was helping fund the group, she said, his influence was waning as other radicals emerged.

Mr. Bashir "is just one individual, and taking one person out of the network, even if that person has a big name, it doesn't have a definitive impact on the security situation," she said. Indonesia's security situation "is probably getting a little better, but it remains unpredictable in the sense that we're no longer dealing with large organizations but small, dispersed groups" that have the potential to plan more attacks, she said.

—Yayu Yuniar and James Hookway contributed to this article.

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