

NGO holds alleged link to terrorism

Written by Sebastian Strangio and Khouth Sophak Chakrya
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Kuwaiti charity's local operations reignite concerns of extremism

A KUWAIT-based Islamic charity that met with National Assembly President Heng Samrin last week has appeared on a US government watch list for providing “financial and material support” to terrorist groups.

Delegates from the Kuwait-Cambodia Islamic Cultural Training Centre (ICTC) met with Heng Samrin on Thursday to discuss charitable donations for Cham communities, said Koam Kosal, Heng Samrin's cabinet director.

Speaking to reporters outside the closed-door meeting, Koam Kosal added that the ICTC has constructed hundreds of schools, wells and sanitation systems for poor Muslims in rural areas since 1991.

It has also cared for more than 1,000 orphaned children through the Good Sources Cambodia Association.

However, a US treasury department statement issued in June 2008 identifies the ICTC, along with several other Cambodia-based organisations, as an international affiliate of the Kuwait-based Revival of Islamic Heritage Society (RIHS).

The US accuses RIHS of delivering “financial and material support” to al-Qaeda and al-Qaeda affiliates such as Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), as well as “financial support for acts of terrorism”.

The statement notes that an RIHS employee provided logistical support to Indonesian Riduan Isamuddin – better known as Hambali – a head JI operative who hid in Phnom Penh during 2002 and early 2003.

In November 2002, the RIHS staff member allegedly helped “escort” him out of the capital to an “alternate location” while the eighth ASEAN Summit was under way in Phnom Penh.

Although overseas Islamic charities provide much-needed assistance to Cambodia's Muslim minority, the ICTC's visit dredges up past concerns that such funds could support efforts to replace the traditionally moderate form of Islam practiced by Chams with a more fundamentalist strain.

In June 2003, Sman Ismael, a Cambodian national, was arrested at a Kuwait-funded madrasa west of the city on suspicion of plotting terrorist acts as part of JI's regional network. Two weeks earlier, an Egyptian and two Thais were detained on similar charges when the Saudi-funded Um Al-Qura madrasa north of Phnom Penh was raided by police.

In December 2004, the latter three were convicted involvement in a plot to attack a Western embassy in Phnom Penh. According to a report in Asia Times, a total of 47 foreigners from Nigeria, Pakistan, Sudan, Thailand, Yemen and Egypt were also deported during the 2003 crackdown.

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Rohan Gunaratna, a regional terrorism expert at the Singapore-based International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism, said Cambodia was right to welcome the benefits of a close relationship with the Middle East, but that transparency should be a key concern. He said many Islamic charities lack transparency, and that up to 40 percent “have been used, misused and abused, with their money ending up in terrorists’ hands”.

“In most cases, when the money leaves Kuwait, for example, they do not know the end user, and there is no proper accountability. Because of that, money has gone into terrorists’ hands,” he said.

Although charities should not themselves be criminalised, Gunaratna said, the flow of money should be closely monitored by governments.

“We have seen ... charities operating in Southeast Asia whose money had gone to support terrorists,” he said. “They should follow every dollar that is spent.”

Ahmad Yahya, a Cham adviser to the government, said he did not know much about ICTC’s sources of funding, but that the close relationship between the government and Cham community leaders meant that any threats would quickly be defused.

“I don’t think that any of these schools are involved in extremism,” he said. “I know most of the teachers. No foreigners come to teach in those schools – only Cambodians.”

He added: “If they were [involved in terrorism], the government would close the schools.”

During his remarks to reporters on Thursday, Koam Kosal described an exchange between ICTC representative Jamal Hasas and Heng Samrin that explicitly dissociated Islam from those who commit violence in its name.

“Jamal Hasas said that in the Koran, the word ‘Islam’ means peace, and those who believe in the Koran love and work against terrorists throughout the world,” Koam Kosal said.

“Heng Samrin in turn told Jamal Hasas that Cambodia’s government extended its welcome to all people and religions who come to bring economic development and reduce poverty in Cambodia.”

Sos Mohammat, president of the Good Sources Cambodia Association, said that his association had received a total of about US\$12 million in funding from the ICTC since 1996 in order to provide orphans with food, housing, sanitation and classroom materials. Like Koam Kosal, he emphasised Hasal’s humanitarian credentials.

US embassy spokesman John Johnson added that the US has sought to “build relationships” with Cambodia’s Islamic community with an eye to augmenting the efforts of the government, which has made “great progress in ensuring the integration of the Cambodian Islamic community”.

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ADDITIONAL REPORTING BY JACOB GOLD