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Obama to visit at crucial moment for Indonesia

The president's three-day trip next week will demonstrate U.S. confidence in the country's security apparatus as it adapts to a mutating militant threat.

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Reporting from Jakarta, Indonesia

President Obama's visit to Indonesia next week will offer the unexpected image of an American president delivering a major diplomatic speech to the Islamic world, from a country that has frequently been the source of terrorist plots against Western targets.

Obama's three-day trip to the world's most populous Muslim country is intended to demonstrate Washington's improving relationship and closer security ties with the government of President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono.

It is also a vote of confidence in Indonesia's security apparatus, once notorious for human rights abuses, but which in recent years has found itself back in favor with the U.S. as it battles home-grown and foreign Islamic extremist networks. Attacks have included the Bali nightclub bombings of 2002, which killed 202 people, and blasts at two foreign-owned hotels last year in Jakarta.

Security authorities are not taking any chances with Obama's visit. Last month, anti-terrorism squads stepped up their monitoring of the Islamist networks across the archipelago, launching a series of raids after the discovery of a remote militant training camp in the Sumatran jungle.

Days later, authorities near Jakarta, the capital, killed a militant leader named Dulmatin, an explosives expert and suspected mastermind of the Bali bombings and member of Jemaah Islamiah, the Southeast Asia terrorist network that has links to Al Qaeda.

In the last decade, Jemaah Islamiah has been responsible for more than 50 bombings across Indonesia, including a Bali attack in 2005 that killed 20 people. The U.S. offered a \$10-million reward for Dulmatin's capture after he reportedly fled to the Philippines.

Authorities have targeted the terrorist network's firearms suppliers and financiers. In September, they killed Noordin Mohammad Top, a Malaysian extremist suspected in the 2009 bombings of the J.W. Marriott and Ritz-Carlton hotels in Jakarta.

But analysts say that even though leaders and foot soldiers have been killed, other extremists quickly rise to take their place.

"Within the Indonesian terror network, there's a constant process of regeneration," said Sidney Jones, a Southeast Asia terrorism expert for the nonprofit International Crisis Group. "Every time the authorities execute big raids and top people are arrested and killed, new bad guys pop up to take over. The groups mutate and become something different than before, so you can't use the old assumptions to guide you in predicting what's coming."

Indonesian authorities believe Jemaah Islamiah may launch more ambitious attacks. In the recent raid of the militant camp in remote Aceh province on Sumatra, agents found a cache of M-16s and AK-47s.

"They are now more dangerous and are targeting important figures such as the police chief and President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono," Indonesia's national police chief told the Jakarta Post during a recent visit to the exposed camp.

Authorities are still hunting for another Jemaah Islamiah bomb maker, Umark Patek, who was believed to have accompanied Dulmatin when he entered Indonesia from the Philippines.

They are also monitoring the emergence of new terrorist splinter groups, including one that recently used a video to chide members of Jemaah Islamiah for not being violent enough.

The video, recently obtained by the Associated Press, shows an extremist saying, "To all those in JI, I tell you: You don't fight jihad with the pen or in a prayer cap and sarong. No, you fight jihad with weapons. Before your hair goes gray with age, join us!"

Portions of the 75-minute video appeared on a militant-linked blog after authorities raided the Aceh camp.

Security analysts say the government needs to modify its anti-terrorism strategies if it wants to stem the violence. Rather than kill extremists, authorities need to capture and interrogate them for valuable intelligence.

"If we kill them, we lose that information," said Noor Huda Ismail, an Indonesian analyst who focuses on extremism. "Look at Dulmatin; how did he get here from the Philippines? What was his purpose? Now we'll never know."

Ismail said many Indonesians see the extremists as martyrs.

"They're heroes," he said. "We need to bring these people to trial. Let the courts show the extent of their networks."

"The public has a right to know."

Others call on the government to outlaw groups such as Jemaah Islamiah and change public perception that the extremist network deserves a voice in Indonesian society.

"Even today, it's not illegal to be a member of these networks," said Rohan Gunaratna, a Singapore-based terrorism analyst.

"People believe that terrorist groups that advocate violence should continue to exist here simply because Indonesia is a democracy," Gunaratna said.

He said the government should work to limit the influence of radical clerics who publicly condone the violence.

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