

Singapore scheme helps de-radicalise detainees in Iraq

SINGAPORE, March 22 - Generals strive to win. And battlefields present the challenge they seek.

So when Marine Major-General Douglas Stone headed for Iraq some three years ago - when the insurgency was at its peak - he knew it was the challenge of a lifetime.

His task was to oversee detainee operations - there were 19,000 detainees at Camp Bucca, one of the world's largest detention centres, and another 3,000 at Camp Cropper, near Baghdad.

Armed with the Quran, which he read seven times, he flew into Baghdad. Maj-Gen Stone, 58, found the situation to be worse than he had imagined.

Soon after he arrived, mass riots involving nearly 10,000 detainees rocked Bucca. Americans were a target.

It was chaotic all round, Maj-Gen Stone told The Sunday Times in a telephone interview recently. Coming after the Abu Ghraib prisoner abuse scandal, the riots further tarnished the image of the United States military.

More sinister was that Al-Qaeda was infiltrating the overcrowded prisons.

Maj-Gen Stone's "war plan" began with understanding the enemy, in this case the radicalised detainees.

Violent Muslims inside detention facilities were mentally and physically coercing others, he said. One clue was that some detainees were demanding transfer to other compounds, leaving US forces initially perplexed.

But soon, they had it figured out: The hardliners wanted to spread out to other facilities to recruit others.

"The acts of violence were an intimidation, not just arguing over ideas," said the general, who has a doctorate in public policy.

"It was a coherent insurgency within the detention facility - the purpose being to recruit people, or to influence their families, to join the Al-Qaeda movement or to turn them against the efforts of the Iraqi government."

A counter-strategy was needed.

This move included, over the next few months, the overhaul of American policies towards prisoners in Iraq.

Maj-Gen Stone crafted what he calls a "Battlefield of the Mind" strategy, with help from Singapore and Saudi Arabia - two countries which had dealt with their own jihadists - and related programmes elsewhere.

His plan involved separating hardliners from moderates, confronting extremist beliefs, and educating those keen on self-improvement in such subjects as Arabic and mathematics. Those due for release were counselled.

The most difficult part was identifying and isolating "the really extreme guys", said Maj-Gen Stone.

Fellow detainees were the most effective means for that, but "they didn't trust us", he said. The guards tried to observe and understand who the real influencers were and to separate them.

It took some time, but once the detainees saw there were opportunities to talk about threats to their own security, and that their cooperation could help get them back to their families, they began to finger the extremists, Maj-Gen Stone said.

"We made a lot of mistakes. But, over time, they would slip us notes and say, "Move that guy.""

Those who seemed willing to change were put through a battery of tests by mental health experts, spiritual clerics, psychologists and educationists.

"If their motivation was purely economic, we gave them jobs," he said.

"For those strongly oriented to their religion, we put them through a religious counselling programme."

For this, Maj-Gen Stone turned to Saudi Arabia and Singapore.

The Saudi programme is expensive, he said. Riyadh goes to the extent of marrying off detainees and helping them get a job, house and car to start a new life.

But the lesson from Riyadh was how critical the family was. "After that, we opened a window in the detention centre to allow detainees to meet and hold their children.

"But in terms of religious studies, the Riyadh programme is focused only on jihadi verses. We felt this was limited," Maj-Gen Stone said.

"I believe the Singapore programme is the best, is the most progressive, and if I am to understand...the recidivist rate is very low, making the Singapore model the most successful."

Singapore's programme is unique as it is a community-based initiative, said Ustaz Mohamed Ali, an associate research fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS). He had been to Iraq, with RSIS professor Rohan Gunaratna, to assist with the programme in Baghdad.

"In Singapore, religious scholars voluntarily provide religious studies to counsel the detainees. Community leaders and members of the public come forward to assist with the family and rehabilitation too," said Ustaz Mohamed.

For the Iraqi programme, nearly 160 moderate imams were brought in to work with the detainees.

Maj-Gen Stone is also glad he read the Quran. "You realise that Al-Qaeda and other violent Islamic groups take the holy Quran and turn the words in very small ways," he said.

"You begin to understand that they are trying to confuse somebody with the meanings of the words...so that the meanings become you can kill innocence and then you can kill other Muslims.

"The power of knowing the Quran is the power to be able to question the legitimacy of the radicalisation process," he said.

With the de-radicalisation efforts showing results, the US military in Iraq set up the Dar al-Hikma (House of Wisdom) school, offering a core curriculum of Arabic, English, maths, science, civics and geography.

On a number of occasions, detainees have even postponed their release to finish their studies, while parents have petitioned to enrol their non-detainee children in the programme.

"This is what's missing and badly needed in Afghanistan," said Mr Hekmat Karzai, director of the Centre for Conflict and Peace Studies in Kabul, when asked by The Sunday Times if his country had similar programmes.

When Maj-Gen Stone left Iraq about five months ago, tens of thousands of detainees had been released to rejoin their families. Several thousand others were halfway through their programmes.

So is he satisfied with the results?

"The recidivism rate has been very low. It is now 1per cent compared to 10 to 15per cent earlier," he said, adding that the detainee population in Iraqi prisons is going down.

Maj-Gen Stone is back in the Pentagon. He will soon assume command of the Marine Forces reserve and Marine Corps NorthCom. - Straits Times