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## Southeast Asia Braces for Islamist Reprisals

By JAMES HOOKWAY And ERIC BELLMAN

Government and security officials around Southeast Asia—a major theater of operations for al Qaeda over the past dozen years—are watching out for potential reprisals from Islamist terrorist groups around the region following news of the death of Osama bin Laden.

The Philippines, in particular, is running threat assessments on al Qaeda-linked groups operating there, while officials in Indonesia say retaliatory strikes remain a possibility and police in Malaysia said they are stepping up security in key locations around the country.

Security analysts say terrorist strikes remain a serious threat in Southeast Asia, where al Qaeda has attempted to seed a number of Islamist terrorist groups with the ultimate aim of creating a single Islamic state spanning from southern Thailand across Malaysia and Singapore to Indonesia and the southern Philippines. The drive has taken hundreds of lives across the region, most notably 202 people, mostly foreign tourists, who were killed in a pair of nightclub bombings in Bali, Indonesia, in 2002, and 116 people who died when Philippines-based terrorists fire bombed a ferry in Manila Bay in 2004.

The biggest threat is that while many militant groups were nurtured by al Qaeda and its operatives, groups such as Abu Sayyaf in the Philippines and elements of the Jemaah Islamiyah group in Indonesia, are capable of operating separately from al Qaeda's core command in Pakistan and Afghanistan, security experts say. The most immediate danger could be in Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim nation, where Islamist radicals have begun operating in smaller and smaller groups to evade an ongoing crackdown on extremists there.

Just in last two months, Indonesia witnessed a series of attacks, with extremists mailing letter bombs to liberal Muslims. In early April, a lone bomber, 31-year old Muhammad Syarif, walked into a mosque in a police compound and blew himself up, killing himself and injuring 30 other people.

"The death of Mr. bin Laden itself will create some resentment and anger among a very tiny group of Muslims and this may be enough to sustain a few attacks," said Rohan Gunaratna, an al Qaeda expert and head of the International Center for Political Violence and Terrorism Research in Singapore. "What's important to understand is that Mr. bin Laden remains a hero to small groups of radicalized Muslims the world over."

Philippine officials said on condition of anonymity that they are working to assess the threat of retaliatory attacks where groups such as Abu Sayyaf and other al Qaeda sympathizers who are still active in the country. Indonesia's largest mainstream Muslim group, with 50 million members, Nahdlatul Ulama, also warned that the killing of Mr. bin Laden doesn't automatically mean the terrorist threat in Indonesia is over. "We have to remain alert," NU chairman Said Agil Siradj, said. "The U.S. killed Osama, but not radicalism."

That said, analysts and security officials say Mr. bin Laden's death does represent a significant set-back to militant organizations in the region because it sends a signal that terrorist can't indefinitely escape capture.

"The death of Osama bin Laden marks a signal defeat for the forces of extremism and terrorism," Philippine President Benigno Aquino III said in a statement. "It represents the end of the efforts of one man to stoke the fires of sectarian hatred and to promote terrorism on a scale unprecedented in the history of mass murder."

Philippine military officials, meanwhile, were hopeful that Mr. bin Laden's death would demoralize members of Abu Sayyaf, which al Qaeda helped launch in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The U.S. military has been in the

country for several years helping to advise and train Philippine troops as they attempt to quash home-grown militant groups and many key Abu Sayyaf leaders have been captured or killed.

"This is a major victory not only for the Armed Forces of the Philippines but for all armed forces who are joined together to fight terrorism," armed forces spokesman Commodore Miguel Rodriguez said in a press briefing in Manila.

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