

Terror threat down but extremism up



Singapore, Malaysia have contained threat with community building: Expert

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THE threat of terrorism in South-east Asia in the post-911 era has been on the decline, especially over the past five years, as governments built counter-terrorism forces and strengthened their intelligence services, a terrorism expert told TODAY.

Realising that terrorism is a serious

threat to their societies and nations, the governments have taken the necessary measures, said Dr Rohan Gunaratna, who heads the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research at Nanyang Technological University.

In contrast, extremism is on the rise worldwide because of the impact of propaganda put out by Al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden, whom Dr Gunaratna believes is still alive and active in the area between the Afghanistan and Pakistan borders.

In the past five months alone, Osama has released four audio and video statements

aimed at radicalising ordinary Muslims to hate non-Muslims and the West.

But in Indonesia, the move to counter terrorism has borne fruit with the creation of the anti-terror unit Detachment 88, which has killed or captured more than 300 members of the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) terrorist group after the October 2002 Bali bombings.

In the Philippines, the armed forces and the police, with the assistance of the United States, have killed or captured "very important operatives" of JI and the violent separatist Abu Sayyaf group.

Dr Gunaratna singled out Singapore and Malaysia as countries that have effectively contained terrorism.

"The Singapore and Malaysian governments have moved beyond operational response to launching effective community engagement programmes to counter the threat of terrorism," he said, referring to the efforts of politicians, religious clerics and community leaders in working closely with the Muslim community.

Terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda, JI and Kumpulan Militan Malaysia are not Quranic groups and are misinterpreting and misrepresenting the great faith of Islam, said Dr Gunaratna.

"They are being led by power-hungry, cunning political leaders masquerading as men of religion such as Abu Bakar Bashir and Osama bin Laden," he said.

Abu Bakar, an elderly Indonesian cleric who was allegedly the spiritual leader of JI,

was found guilty by Indonesian courts in 2003 of being part of an "evil conspiracy" to commit the 2002 Bali bombings, although all charges directly linking him to the attacks were dropped. He was released from Indonesian prison in June last year, after serving a 25-month sentence.

Osama is believed to be still alive and active in the mountainous Federally Administered Tribal Area (Fata), between the Afghanistan and Pakistan borders.

"Our centre's research and other sources of information indicate that Osama is not dead, but is operating out of Fata.

"Osama is there because for more than 25 years, the people of Fata have identified themselves with Afghanistan in fighting against foreign occupiers including the Soviet invasion from 1979 to 1989, and the US and coalition forces since 2001," said Dr Gunaratna.

His colleague, Mr Saifullah Khan Mahsud, an Afghan from Fata who is working as a research analyst with the centre, said that for a long while Osama was not in the spotlight, leading many to believe he was dead.

But he was all the while re-grouping Al Qaeda and had now re-emerged on the scene and poses a bigger threat.

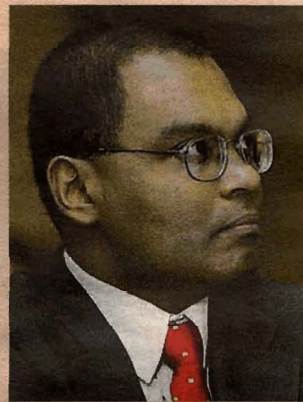
Dr Gunaratna said the threat of terrorism in Singa-

pore is "low to medium" now, compared to the "very significant level" between 2000 and 2002. "Even before 911, Al Qaeda and JI had planned to attack Singapore, Indonesia and the Philippines, where there are Western interests," he said.

Singapore has taken the threat of terrorism very seriously and "no other government in South-east Asia has invested so much in combating terrorism", said Dr Gunaratna.

There was, however, a crucial need for a coordinated international effort to fight Al Qaeda as it is "still a capable organisation".

"The approach should be to focus on building a bridge to the global Muslim community and working with them to fight extremism," he said.



No other South-east Asian nation has invested as much in combating terrorism.

— Terrorism expert Rohan Gunaratna on Singapore

Battle against terror in Pakistan won't change after polls, say analysts

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PAKISTAN'S elections in January are not likely to affect the country's efforts in helping the West fight global terrorism, but Islamabad needs international support to hunt down more terrorists, analysts in Singapore said yesterday.

"I do not foresee any difference in Pakistan's policy towards fighting extremism, whether or not there will be a change of government in Islamabad," Mr Saifullah Khan Mahsud, a research analyst at Nanyang Technological University (NTU), told TODAY.

Mr Mahsud, who works at NTU's International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research (ICPVTR), said: "Being a key ally of the United States, Pakistan's policy will remain the same as far as fighting terrorism is concerned."

"President Pervez Mushar-

War on terror won't stop



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raf has provided very rigorous leadership in combating terrorists and he can only continue to do so as a president," added Mr Mahsud, an Afghan who specialises in research on Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Area (Fata), which is bordered by Afghanistan to the west.

According to ICPVTR research, Al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden is believed to be operating out of Fata, which covers 1,520 miles of mountainous

terrain. The population in this semi-autonomous tribal belt is predominantly Muslim and Fata is home to ethnically diverse tribes.

Mr Mahsud's colleague Dr Rohan Gunaratna, who heads ICPVTR, told TODAY that the Musharraf government has played a pivotal role in fighting Al Qaeda and other terrorist groups in Fata.

"Unfortunately, there is very little recognition of the contributions from its military

as well as law enforcement and intelligence agencies in reducing the threat of terrorism in tribal Pakistan — essentially Fata — and mainland Pakistan. The West must continue to assist Pakistan to control and contain the rising tide of extremism," said Dr Gunaratna.

He agreed with Mr Mahsud, saying he does not expect Pakistan's fight against terrorism to change if either Benazir Bhutto or Nawaz Sharif, both former prime ministers, win the upcoming election. "However, Mr Musharraf was able to play a decisive role in fighting terrorism because he directly controlled both the military and intelligence establishments in the country," added Dr Gunaratna.

He noted that in its close cooperation with the Americans in countering terrorism, Pakistan had paid a high price — its border in Fata has been eroded by terrorist activities.

"It is essential for the West, together with Asian countries, to support Pakistan in furthering its efforts amid the rise in extremism worldwide," Dr Gunaratna said.

SCHOOL'S OUT:

A demonstration by students in Islamabad yesterday against Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf, whose government has formally retired 37 judges, including the former chief justice, who refused to approve emergency rule.



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