

Closer ties needed to counter terrorism

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MANAMA (BAHRAIN): - Interpol president Khoo Boon Hui has warned governments that unless they cooperate much more closely in fighting terrorism, security threats will grow faster than the capacity of countries to counter them.

'Not one agency, government or region can operate in a vacuum. Now more than ever we must devote greater, not fewer, resources to keeping our citizens and countries safe,' he told 400 anti- terrorism officials and academics at an international security forum in Bahrain this week.

In his keynote speech at the event, one of the largest such gatherings ever held in the Middle East, Mr Khoo admitted that it was only when he joined Interpol, after serving for almost 12 years as the Commissioner of the Singapore Police Force, that he 'fully appreciated' the 'inextricable link' between his country's national security and that of the rest of the world.

He hailed the progress which has been made in sharing sensitive information about suspected terrorists. Singled out for particular praise was Saudi Arabia, which Mr Khoo said only two weeks ago asked Interpol to issue an international security alert - also known as an 'Orange Notice' - for 83 Saudi nationals and two Yemenis suspected of ties with Al-Qaeda.

But Mr Khoo also pointed out that what the Saudis did was 'rare, all too rare', and that in many other terrorist incidents, the 'still-dominant reflex within the law enforcement community' is to investigate at the national level first. This, he said, needs to change. His appeal was echoed by Mr Michael Chertoff, who served until last month as the Secretary of Homeland Security for the United States.

Terrorism, Mr Chertoff pointed out, may emerge as a response to local grievances, either imaginary or real. Yet it always ends up 'feeding on the pillars of globalisation: financial flows, free travel and communication'.

International cooperation is, therefore, the only method for tackling this menace, he said.

But many of the Middle Eastern participants in Bahrain repeatedly condemned the 'War on Terror' policy of former US president George W. Bush. They castigated it as a catchy but ultimately empty slogan which has succeeded in alienating the Islamic world without producing a real strategy.

Mr Chertoff offered no apologies. Depending on the circumstances, he said, America will either engage in 'war-making' if the task is to 'destroy terrorist targets' outside US borders, or deploy traditional police measures if the alleged terrorists can be apprehended by peaceful means.

Nevertheless, all the participants acknowledged that, at least for the moment, no government has found the perfect method to counter terrorists' propaganda.

Sir Ian Blair - London's top police officer during the July 2005 bombings in the British capital - frankly admitted that the message of militants 'remains vibrant and universal, not only to those excited by extremism, but also to the lonely and unbalanced'.

Dr Norman Vasu, an assistant professor at the **Centre of Excellence for National Security**, Nanyang Technological University, highlighted another major problem.

While governments everywhere consider terrorism as their top threat, Dr Vasu showed that opinion polls conducted in Europe and elsewhere persistently indicate that ordinary people remain preoccupied with their daily economic conditions, and even more so during the present financial crisis.

As he pointed out, the task which faces governments is not merely one of cooperating in the improvement of security measures, but also one of explaining to their own citizens why such measures are required, and what the threat really is.

Less secrecy both between nations and within nations seems to be the appropriate answer.

Either way, Bahrain's Interior Minister, Shaikh Rashid bin Abdullah Al Khalifa, spoke for all the participants when he concluded that the task of fighting terrorism is 'never-ending; there may not be a day when we can proclaim victory'.