

The Malaysian Insider

Could Mas Selamat have attacked Singapore?

MAY 11 — The disclosure that Mas Selamat Kastari was plotting against Singapore while on the run did not surprise terrorism experts but they doubt that he had gathered enough resources to launch a large-scale operation.

Sidney Jones of the International Crisis Group, who has closely tracked extremist groups in the region, said a critical mass of people is key.

“You can’t just carry out an attack by yourself, even for somebody who is a committed suicide bomber. You need people to do the surveying, to help prepare materials and to be lookouts.”

She added: “So far, there isn’t an example in the region of something that’s worked with just two or three people. It would have been very hard.”

Dr Kumar Ramakrishna, head of the Centre of Excellence for National Security at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), said: “Mas Selamat is a strategic personnel whose strengths lie in planning and training people in basic bomb-making and surveillance.

“But even with his ability, he may not be able to launch an attack if he does not have the manpower, money and support to do so.”

However, it is his nature to plan attacks while staying under the radar, said Dr Rohan Gunaratna, head of the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research at RSIS.

“Even if he had limited resources, he is in touch with the Indonesian and Malaysian branches of Jemaah Islamiah and is an Al Qaeda-trained operator.”

Mas Selamat received help from two Malaysian friends who were ordinary JI members, after he escaped from Whitley Road Detention Centre on Feb 27 last year and escaped to Johor.

They gave him shelter for free for more than a year in a secluded kampung house in Skudai, Johor. All three were arrested on April 1.

Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak told Malaysian reporters last week that when he was caught, “his main focus was Singapore” and that “he was planning a lot of things in Singapore”.

Dr Gunaratna said this revelation was not surprising, as Mas Selamat’s primary target has always been Singapore and that he had in the past planned attacks on the Republic while based overseas.

Among them was a 2002 botched plan to hijack an aeroplane in Bangkok to crash into Changi Airport. It showed that he is willing to carry out suicide attacks if need be, added Gunaratna.

While experts said it was speculation at this stage to say what Mas Selamat may have been plotting, Dr John Harrison from the RSIS said his best skills was that of escape and planning attacks. “He has the valuable ability to look at a situation and assess it when it comes to getting around security.

Experts say that Mas Selamat may have been planning to attack what is termed as an “iconic target”.

Examples include the Singapore Flyer, the Merlion or prominent buildings which form Singapore’s skyline in the Central Business District.

Harrison said: “Such an attack will be dramatic and spectacular.” — The Straits Times