

Johor's remote areas 'safer' hideout after crackdown in Indonesia

NO SIGN

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THERE was no sign of him in Singapore. There was no hint of his capture, as early as 1 April.

Suddenly yesterday, news of his capture emerged - and led to more questions.

Why not inform Singaporeans? How did he end up in Johor? Why Johor Baru?

Previous speculation was that he would have made a run for it to disappear into the vast archipelago that is Indonesia. After all, he used to live there and is said to know many of the islands like the back of his hand.

Turns out, Mas Selamat was a lot nearer that anybody would have imagined.

The Bernama news agency reported that the fugitive leader of the Singapore Jemaah Islamiah (JI) network was arrested near Skudai, about 25km from Johor Baru.

So it is entirely possible that Singaporeans could have walked past Singapore's No 1 fugitive while shopping for cheap groceries or having a meal across the Causeway without even knowing it.

Analysts earlier said Mas Selamat was likely to be in Indonesia, where he was born and where he has links with JI leaders like Noordin Mohd Top.

Why would he risk hiding so close to Singapore, in an area that is often frequented by Singaporeans?

A source, who is familiar with the operations to nab Mas Selamat, told Bernama: 'We know that he has relatives staying in Skudai.'

Associate Professor Kumar Ramakrishna of the Centre of Excellence for National Security added that Johor was also a good place for Mas Selamat to be if he was planning terrorist operations against Singapore or other South-east Asian countries.

This is because of the proximity of Malaysia to Indonesia, Singapore and the Philippines.

He believes that Mas Selamat was rebuilding his terror network in Malaysia and planning to relocate to Indonesia.

He told Channel NewsAsia yesterday: 'The Malaysians only invoke ISA if it was close to execution stage. So (there's) enough evidence for them to invoke the Act, to make the case that there's a need for the Act to be implemented for Mas Selamat.'

Malaysian prime minister Najib Razak confirmed this, saying that Mas Selamat was plotting new attacks on Singapore when he was detained, reported AFP.

He said: '...his main focus at the time was Singapore. He was planning a lot of things in Singapore.'

Malaysian Home Minister Hishammuddin Hussein told reporters at a press conference yesterday that this was partly what got him caught.

Planning something

'He (Mas Selamat) was planning something, which allowed us to arrest him. We are becoming an expert on him,' Reuters reported him as saying.

'Hopefully, this time he will not escape us.'

Terrorism expert Clive Williams, of the Australian Defence Force Academy, thought Mas Selamat would be nabbed in Johor or near the Thai-Malaysian border, where he grew up and could easily blend in and hide.

Freelance defence and security analyst Dzirhan Mahadzir said Mas Selamat could first have fled to Indonesia, but later moved to Malaysia because the Indonesian government's crackdown on militants and terrorists made the place 'too hot' for him.

He said: 'He may have preferred to stay in Johor because the state has many remote areas where he can hide.'

Mr Dzirhan also did not rule out that Mas Selamat may have looked for shelter among JI supporters in the state.

Since Mas Selamat had met former JI head Abubakar Bashir at the Lukmanul Haqiem School in Ulu Tiram, Johor, which Bashir founded, and where Noordin was vice-principal, he said it was likely that there were some JI supporters in the state whom he could count on for support and help.

Mr Najib said Mas Selamat entered Malaysia a few days after he escaped from Whitley Road Detention Centre on 27 Feb last year.

The date of his arrest, 1 Apr, was also the date Malaysians Abdul Matin Anol Rahmat and Johar Hassan were nabbed by Malaysian authorities, suggesting there may have been a link between the three men.

Mas Selamat is now detained in Malaysia under its Internal Security Act (ISA).

NEED FOR SECRECY

SILENCE, say experts reacting to the delay in news of Mas Selamat Kastari's arrest, is golden.

This is because the invaluable, critical information he could provide would override the public's need to know.

Mas Selamat was arrested by Malaysian police on 1 Apr but news of his capture did not become public on Thursday.

It could have been kept quiet for longer, if The Straits Times did not break the story yesterday.

Deputy Prime Minister and Home Affairs Minister Wong Kan Seng said the Government did not inform the public earlier because of the need for secrecy.

Early release might 'compromise operations and jeopardise the sources of information'.

A statement from the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) said 'there were larger operational and security considerations at stake'.

The statement added that the Malaysian Special Branch and Singapore's Internal Security Department were 'not prepared to go public on the information until a time when it was operationally appropriate to reveal the details'.

Assistant Professor John Harrison of the S Rajaratnam School of International Studies said the authorities would have first wanted to find out all they could about the JI network, what terrorist plots were being planned, what plans were disrupted, before announcing Mas Selamat's capture.

He said the Singapore authorities 'did well to give up the public relations victory for the long-term strategic one'.

Malaysian defence and security analyst Dzirhan Mahadzir said the Malaysian and Singapore governments probably never planned to release news of Mas Selamat's arrest this early.

He said: 'Keeping Mas Selamat's arrest secret would have the added advantage that his fellow operatives and contacts would go about their daily routines none the wiser and so be easier to nab.'

He said both governments probably did their best to deny the leaks but when they became too many and too close to accuracy, they had no choice but to confirm the news.