

Mas Selamat's arrest will have little or no impact on JI splinter cells

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SINGAPORE: Kudos to Singapore's Internal Security Department and the Malaysian Special Branch for the recapture of former Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) leader Mas Selamat Kastari.

And yes, his arrest has dealt a blow to a JI network already suffering from "a crisis of leadership", as S Rajaratnam School of International Studies' (RSIS) senior fellow Antonio Rappa pointed out.

But hold the champagne — there is precious little time to rejoice, not with major events such as the Youth Olympics and the Asia—Pacific Economic Cooperation meetings to be held here in the near future.

Indeed, it would be foolish and ironic for Singaporeans to let their guard down now, especially since Mas Selamat's escape in February last year had drilled home important lessons on complacency.

Deputy Prime Minister Wong Kan Seng was the first to remind Singaporeans to stay vigilant. "Singaporeans must not think that just because Mas Selamat is arrested ... the threat of terrorism will not be there anymore," Mr Wong, who is also the Home Minister, said on Friday as he confirmed the arrest.

In the 13 months that Mas Selamat was hiding, presumably in Johor, terrorists elsewhere had been hogging the limelight: Attacks in Mumbai and Lahore killed more than 190 people and injured hundreds more.

Just last week, Singaporeans received the sombre news that one of its own, Mohammad Hassan Saynudin, was convicted in an Indonesian court for leading three other terrorists in killing a Christian—Indonesian teacher and plotting an attack on a bar frequented by non—Muslims.

His case offers the latest example of how splinter cells are posing to be the "bigger danger", said Ms Sidney Jones, a senior adviser with the International Crisis Group.

Noting how Mohammad Hassan single—handedly turned the cell from a "non—violent group into a violent group", Ms Jones told Weekend Xtra: "You only need one committed person who can then recruit and organise a much smaller group that may have had no affiliation to jihadist groups more generally."

The reality is that the recapture of Mas Selamat would have little or no impact on these splinter cells, said Ms Jones.

Dr Rappa added: "We also have to realise that there are larger problems looming in the horizon ... not just Mas Selamat, he was just like the flavour of the month."

To rehabilitate or not?

As and when the Malaysian authorities hand him over, Mas Selamat would be brought back to the Whitley Road Detention Centre, which has beefed up its security considerably since the lapses.

But as the authorities have stressed previously, the facility was designed to rehabilitate — and not punish — detainees.

Given his numerous escape attempts, Mas Selamat's belligerence — he was caught with two others while reportedly hatching another terrorist plot — has cast doubts on his willingness to abandon extremist leanings.

Said RSIS' Associate Professor Kumar Ramakrishna: "It is not even clear if he would accept rehabilitation as he is without doubt a truly hardcore 'true believer'. Religious rehabilitation is extremely difficult with such individuals."

Mr Muhammad Haniff Hassan, a prominent Muslim cleric, stressed that Mas Selamat "remains an ordinary human being who deserves a chance", despite his track record.

The general consensus around the world is that rehabilitation is an effective and humane tool to quell the extremist threat. Notable successes include the leaders of the Egyptian Al—Jihad and Islamic Groups — two of the largest groups in the world — who renounced violence in 1997 and 2007 respectively.

"(They) have now become the forefront critiques of Al Qaeda after more than a decade in prisons," said Mr Muhammad.

On rehabilitation, Ms Jones said: "The problem with these programmes, in general, is that the only way you know if they've been successful is if somebody is tempted to rejoin the network.

"In Singapore, when people get released, they are mostly not exposed to temptation ... Mas Selamat had the opportunity (to escape) and he took it — with vengeance."

— TODAY/so