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Threat remains as long as JI exists

Security experts, who track the Jemaah Islamiah network closely, give their views on Mas Selamat Kastari's capture and what it means for Singapore and the region.

By Teh Joo Lin & Zakir Hussain



Dr Kumar Ramakrishna (left), head of RSIS' Centre of Excellence for National Security, on why he does not expect Mas Selamat to be handed over to Singapore soon.

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What help did Mas Selamat receive to escape and while on the run?

MALAYSIA HAS FIRST CALL

'The Malaysians will have first call on him because he's captured on Malaysian soil and (with him) being the regional JI leader, the Malaysians - and for that matter, the Indonesians - will want to talk to him and get as much information as they can out of him regarding the extent of JI's network.'

'So the Malaysians will want to hold on to him until they are satisfied he's coughed up every last bit of information he knows. ... more

The escape appeared well planned, said Ms Sidney Jones of the International Crisis Group, with a likelihood that a route to get Mas Selamat to Malaysia was set up beforehand.

She also observed that his escape took place soon after two Indonesian Jemaah Islamiah (JI) leaders, Dr Agus and Abu Husna, made their way to Malaysia.

'I have no idea if there's a connection though,' she added.

Dr Jacob Ramsay of the Control Risks Group agreed that the escape route seemed well-planned.

'Just the fact that he avoided capture after escaping from Whitley Road Detention Centre would suggest that it was all pre-planned and a very good strategy to evade arrest, and with ties in Malaysia to help him out,' he said.

Dr Tim Huxley, executive director of the International Institute of Strategic Studies - Asia, said the circumstances of the escape might suggest a network in Singapore and Malaysia that provided aid, but that could be confirmed only during the interrogation process.

Why did he flee to and remain in Malaysia, and in particular, Johor?

The JI network in Johor is a very strong and resilient one, said Professor Rohan Gunaratna of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS).

It was this network that was protecting Mas Selamat, he added.

Throughout the 1990s, the JI operated a madrasah in Ulu Tiram, a 30-minute drive from the Causeway. The school served as a training ground for several terrorists and a meeting place for JI leaders and operatives. The families of several JI members also lived close by.

The Malaysian authorities closed the madrasah in 2002.

Neither Singapore nor Malaysia has revealed where Mas Selamat was caught on April 1 but Malaysian media quoted sources as saying he was nabbed in Skudai, where he is known to have relatives. The town is 25km from Johor Baru.

Ms Jones said it appeared that Mas Selamat had gone back to the old JI headquarters in Ulu Tiram.

'It suggests that the JI network in Malaysia may be less destroyed than we thought,' she added.

What will happen to him now?

Deputy Prime Minister Wong Kan Seng said the Malaysians wanted to continue interviewing Mas Selamat and would send him back to Singapore when they felt it was time to do so.

Dr Kumar Ramakrishna, head of RSIS' Centre of Excellence for National Security, said he did not expect the handover to take place soon.

'The Malaysians will have first call on him because he's captured on Malaysian soil and (with him) being the regional JI leader, the Malaysians - and for that matter, the Indonesians - will want to talk to him and get as much information as they can out of him regarding the extent of JI's network,' he said.

'So the Malaysians will want to hold on to him until they are satisfied he's coughed up every last bit of information he knows.

'The Malaysians will also want to find out more about how he was able to stay in Johor for such a long time - this is a very clear indication there must be some kind of network. They will want to uncover any previously unknown support network.'

On his return to Singapore, Mas Selamat can expect more intensive interrogation by the Singapore authorities. He will be placed under enhanced security as he has demonstrated resourcefulness and cunning in escaping from detention, Dr Kumar said.

He expressed doubt that religious rehabilitation, which has been effective with other JI detainees in Singapore, will work with a 'hard-core, true believer' like Mas Selamat.

Is the terror threat still a serious one?

Dr Huxley said that as long as a JI network exists and there are JI members, the group poses a threat.

However, the threat is no longer at the same level as it was earlier this decade, due to the active measures the Indonesian authorities have taken, with support from other regional countries, to apprehend and interrogate and prosecute those involved in terror attacks.

He noted that there has been no major terrorist attack in the region since 2005.

Mr Azhar Ghani, a research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies and a former regional risk consultant, said the recent open court trial in Indonesia and TV interviews of Singaporean JI member Fajar Taslim brought home - 'from the horse's mouth' - just how serious the JI members were about their terror plans.

These showed that Singaporeans who think like Fajar and Mas Selamat pose 'very real dangers, are very motivated and are not just playing at being jihadists'.

Fajar was jailed 18 years for killing a Christian school teacher and planning attacks against Westerners in Indonesia.

Mas Selamat was Fajar's superior in the Singapore JI chapter.

'We've known for a while that the terror threat from JI as a coherent organisation has diminished somewhat due to the arrest or demise of key personnel, and also due to a change in the group's strategic direction to abandon a violence-as-a- first-option approach,' Mr Azhar said.

'However, as the Fajar Taslim episode has shown, individuals within JI can form new cells independently by radicalising those around them. In that sense, the capture of Mas Selamat probably stopped him from doing the same.'

Prof Gunaratna said terrorism would remain the pre-eminent threat in the region in the foreseeable future.

'The only way terrorism can be fought is by political will and operational skill, both of which are present in the region,' he said.

What does the arrest demonstrate?

The experts praised the close cooperation between the intelligence agencies in Singapore and Malaysia, which led to the capture of Mas Selamat.

Dr Ramsay described the capture as a coup for Singapore and said it would restore confidence in the intelligence communities both here and across the Causeway.

It would also strike a major blow to the morale of the JI network, he said, and contribute to the terror group's deterioration.

Prof Gunaratna said its most important lesson was that 'security and intelligence cooperation is the spearhead of counter-terrorism'.

It also showed the strength of Singapore's intelligence services, as Mas Selamat has now been re-captured three times based on intelligence provided by Singapore.

'Singapore has emerged as the regional intelligence and intellectual hub in the fight against terrorism,' he said.

Dr Huxley said the arrest confirmed that longstanding security arrangements between Singapore and Malaysia, which date back to their cooperation against the Communists, remained in place.

'It is evidence that bilateral relations have been adapted to a new sort of threat and that's positive for everyone in the region,' he said.

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