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Hambali caught in Thailand (HL)

KUALA LUMPUR, Fri. - Hambali (picture), Southeast Asia's most wanted man, was captured in Thailand in a clandestine operation involving several intelligence agencies, and whisked out from the country to an undisclosed location.

Born Riduan Isamuddin, the 39-year-old is believed to have masterminded last October's Bali bombings and was the main link between Jemaah Islamiyah and Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda network. He was caught in Ayutthaya, about 80km north of Bangkok, on Monday.

United States President George W. Bush announced the arrest in San Diego, California, but declined to say where Hambali was being held.

Reuters reports that Hambali, the suspected mastermind behind numerous deadly bombings, was handed over to the Americans following his arrest and flown out of the country.

Hambali, now clean-shaven and his face altered by plastic surgery, was arrested with a woman by Thai and US officials, a senior Thai general said.

"A special flight from the US picked him up at Bangkok airport on Wednesday morning," said the general.

Initial reports stated that Hambali and his wife, who is also believed to have been arrested, were flown home to Indonesia, but this was later denied.

In Swaziland, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, asked whether he was happy that Hambali was captured with the assistance of the Malaysian intelligence, said he would have to find out more about it.

"I will have to find out more about this thing because I am not aware and I have not received the detailed information and not really in a position to make any comment," he said after his bilateral talks with Sudan President Lt Gen Omar Hassan Ahmad Al-Bashir on the sidelines of the Southern Africa International Dialogue in Ezulwini.

Asked how active police were in helping neighbouring countries trace Hambali, Dr Mahathir said: "I don't know, I have to find out from those people who are handling it."

Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi described Hambali's arrest as a big victory as the JI leader was well-known to have played a big role in terrorist activities.

"I was informed that he was caught in Thailand. This is a big victory as he is a well-known terrorist," he said in Kepala Batas, Penang, after officiating at the ground breaking ceremony for the RM4 million Pusat Budi Penyayang community centre.

Asked whether South East Asia would be free of terrorist activities, Abdullah said it was rather too early to judge.

On Hambali's Malaysian permanent resident status, Abdullah said it had been revoked as soon as the Government learnt of his involvement in terrorist activities.

Inspector-General of Police Tan Sri Norian Mai said Bukit Aman was informed of Hambali's arrest several days ago, and was keen to question him on the movement's activities here.

Police are hoping the Indonesian ulama's Sabahan wife can help investigators.

"She is in Thailand... we can assume that she is now in custody," Norian said.

"We have an interest in this case. Hambali has been in Malaysia before and he has a Malaysian wife, so there definitely is a link there.

"We are keen to know if he can help us in our investigations. If not, we hope his wife can," he said.

Asked whether the arrest was made following a tip-off from Malaysian police, Norian would only say that intelligence had been shared between Malaysian and Thai authorities.

"The intelligence agencies of Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia and Singapore were all working towards the same objective," he said.

On possible retaliatory attacks following Hambali's arrest, Norian said it depended on how much the organisation's infrastructure had been affected.

"We believe we have disrupted their infrastructure and operations."

Reuters quoting a Thai newspaper said a cache of explosives was discovered with Hambali, who was planning to stage an attack at the Asia Pacific Economic Co-operation leaders summit in October.

Hambali is suspected of being involved in the Aug 5 bombing of the J.W. Marriott Hotel in Jakarta which killed 12 people and injured 150, and the bombing of a nightclub in Bali on Oct 12 which killed more than 200 people.

US authorities have also linked him to the Sept 11, 2001 attack on the World Trade Centre in New York which left more than 3,000 dead.

Hambali's arrest is the biggest success for authorities following that of JI's spiritual leader and second-in-command, Abu Bakar Bashir, who is on trial for treason and several church bombings in Indonesia.

Police are still looking for another top JI member, Dr Azahari Husin, a Malaysian who is believed to be the organisation's bomb expert.

In the Philippines, officials described Hambali's arrest as a major victory over terrorism but warned against retaliatory attacks.

"It's a big blow to JI and international terrorism," National Security Adviser Roilo Golez told The Associated Press in Manila. "It chopped off one of the heads of JI."

Golez said the arrest also demonstrated the effectiveness of international co-operation in the fight against terrorism.

But he warned against letting the guard down and to be ready for possible retaliatory attacks.

In Indonesia, President Megawati Sukarnoputri vowed to dismantle the terrorist network responsible for attacks in the country.

"We continue to hunt down these perpetrators, prosecute and put them on trial after they are arrested, and strive to dismantle the network responsible for these barbaric acts.

"We will continue to fight terrorism and we will never give up," Megawati said in a televised state of the nation address.

Megawati, speaking in Parliament ahead of Indonesia's Independence Day celebrations on Aug 17, made no mention of the arrest of Hambali.