

Malaysia's Militant Headache
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By Luke Hunt

Recent arrests have sparked fears that militants may be eyeing a Mumbai-style attack. Foreigners would be the likely target.

Tawau is a quiet little place – and possibly the remotest city in Malaysia. Tucked away near the Indonesian border in the state of Sabah, it's well known in diplomatic circles as a Malaysian transit hub between Indonesia and the Southern Philippines.

It's also a favorite stop over for pirates, smugglers, mercenaries, illegal workers and the Darul Islam movement, whose roots can be traced back to Indonesia's independence almost 65 years ago. Since then, [Darul Islam](#) has spawned a litany of Muslim militant groups like Jemaah Islamiyah (JI).

Most who pass through continue on, but some stay to stock-up on supplies, reload and plan for another day as authorities found out when 13 suspected terrorists were arrested in Tawau last month under the [Internal Security Act](#).

Among them were seven Malaysians, five Indonesians and a Filipino, all of whom were initially labeled as suspected members of JI and alleged to be gathering weapons and bomb making material from The Philippines to be used against the Singaporean Embassy in Jakarta.

"The arrests...raise fresh concerns over the threat of a terrorist attack utilizing small arms and targeting foreigners," says Todd Elliott, a security analyst with Jakarta-based Concord Consulting.

He also says that according to his sources, it was likely not the first time the Umar group had attempted to smuggle firearms into Indonesia from the southern Philippines, allegedly with the assistance of corrupt Philippines police officers and Umar's son, who is said to be a member of the Abu Sayyaf Group. Other plans included a plot to kidnap a police officer to exchange for other militants under detention and to "start activities that would be harmful to the country."

The arrests and pending prosecutions have landed the authorities in an unwanted political mess. Local journalists and analysts have been warned not to speculate, and religious parties like PAS have been urged not politicize the arrests. Rights groups, meanwhile, are disturbed the police used the ISA to make the arrests after Prime Minister Najib Razak announced he would repeal the widely loathed law.

The Sabah branch of the Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS) reacted strongly, saying all 13 were members or supporters and called on police to either release or charge them. Under the ISA, police can detain indefinitely without reason.

PAS was rebuked for admitting foreigners to a Malaysian political party with Chai Kim Sen, Youth Secretary General of the Chinese dominated MCA, saying it "should be left to the police to decide whether the persons arrested are missionaries or terrorists."

"The security of our country is at stake here...PAS and its allies in Pakatan Rakyat should not politicize the issue further by making up lies and distorting the truth," he added, referring to opposition groups.

The Abolish ISA Movement and human rights group Suaram then took aim, condemning police and the government for using the ISA, which they said was regrettable and contradicted Razak's pending abolition of a law introduced by his party after Malaysia gained independence in 1957.

"What is the rationale behind the detention? Is the prime minister trying to fool the people of Malaysia with his hypocritical attitude? The PM should be ashamed of this arrest," they said in a joint statement.

Ji is largely defunct, splinter groups have emerged to replace it and they have been prominent in Indonesia, where attacks have focused on small local targets like isolated police stations and even a mosque. The 13 were arrested as they swore allegiance to Kaltim, also known as the Abu Umar group.

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