

Terrorism Golden Triangle: A Challenge in Counter Terrorism of The Three States (Indonesia, Philippines and Malaysia)

• Oleh Fatima Astuti

Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines share close borders which is known as the golden triangle. Within these areas, terrorists managed to penetrate and illegally move between the three countries. This remains a challenge for regional counterterrorism efforts and there are concerns on what should and can be done in the future.

In February 2012 there were reports that Zulkifli Abdul Hir alias Marwan, a Malaysian national and one of the most wanted leaders of the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) was not among those killed in the airstrikes of the Philippine military in Jolo, Southern Philippines. It was first reported that Marwan was among the 14 terrorists killed in the airstrikes launched against a hideout of the notorious Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG). Marwan is one of at least five foreigners with links to deceased Al Qaeda leader Osama Bin Laden, who the Philippine military said, is hiding in Mindanao. Marwan was trained in engineering in the United States and he is the one who reportedly trains the ASG in bomb-making. The other fugitives are Mauwiyah, a Singaporean of Indian descent with military background; Saad and Qayyim, both Indonesians; and Amin Baco, a Malaysian.

Professor Rommel Banlaoi, the Executive Director of the Philippine Institute for Peace Violence and Terrorism Research (PIPVTR), said that there are at least 30 foreign religiously-based paramilitary operatives in Mindanao. The presence and movement of these foreign operatives in Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines have been taking place since 1996. There are still a number of operatives who illegally move in and out between the three countries even though stricter measures have been implemented to counter terrorism and secure borders between the three countries.

To further illustrate this phenomenon, in June 2009, JI operative Umar Patek travelled to Indonesia by sea-from Sulu, in the Southern Philippines he went to Tarakan, East Kalimantan. Patek was accompanied by two other operatives, Hasan Noor and Harry Kuncoro. From Tarakan, Patek travelled by boat to Surabaya, East Java and then he took bus from Surabaya to Jakarta. In Jakarta, he met with Dulmatin who picked him up at the bus terminal in Pulogadung, East Jakarta. Prior to his travel, Umar Patek was reported to have acquired PHP970,000 (approximately USD 22,400) from an ASG leader. Patek also sold one M16 rifle with 16 magazines fully loaded with ammunition for PHP17,000 (approximately USD 3,900). The proceeds from the sale were used to pay for Patek's travel to Afghanistan and Indonesia. Dulmatin helped Patek acquire a new passport from the East Jakarta Immigration Office in June 2009. Patek's used this passport, which was under the name Anis Alawi Jafar, when he and his wife (who used the name Fatima Zahra) left for Pakistan on 30 August 2010 via Bangkok, Thailand.

The death of Dulmatin in a police raid in Jakarta on March 2010 is another example how foreign operatives can cross borders easily. Many intelligence agencies believed that Dulmatin had been hiding in the Philippines for the past eight years before his death. It was reported that one of those killed in the raid was Hasan Noor (Hasan Noer) alias Blackberry, a Filipino national who was said to be the bodyguard of Dulmatin. As mentioned earlier, Hasan Noor was one of those who accompanied Umar Patek when he went back to Indonesia.

The three cases mentioned above showed that despite the increased counterterrorism measures, there are still weaknesses in border security in the golden triangle of Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines. While there is no single country that is at fault, it is the responsibility of the countries to increase their initiatives especially in border security. Other than the issue of the movement of foreign operatives, weapons and arms smuggling, and human smuggling, are rampant in these areas. These are important issues to be concerned about because when the opportunity and intentions are present (operatives and arms), the threat will be relatively higher.



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The Indonesian government must intensify the security along its borders as well increase its maritime capability to secure its sea borders as well. Cooperation in border security between Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines should have clear objectives and effective implementation strategies. For instance, it would be a mistake to classify all foreign operatives in Mindanao as part of the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI). As stressed by Professor Banlaoi, the use of the term "JI" in ambiguous because most of the foreign operatives do not consider themselves as JI members. Some prefer to be identified with the JAT (Jamaah Anshorut Tauhid), another Indonesian group that was listed as a foreign terrorist organization by the United States government. The use of the JAT among foreign operatives in the Philippines is also another proof of the existence of a cooperation mechanism between religiously violent operatives in the region. After the JAT was listed as foreign terrorist organization, any mention of the group in the Philippines disappeared. Simplifying the identification of foreign fugitives in the Philippines will have an impact on cooperation between states to tackle terrorism in the region. It is important that countries should build a good cooperation based on real facts and developments on the ground to have a better strategy in reducing the security threat.



Yayasan Prasasti Perdamaian
INSTITUTE FOR INTERNATIONAL
PEACE BUILDING

Jl. Tebet Timur Dalam VI/A no. 15
Tebet. Jakarta Selatan.

Phone: +62 21 98253853

Website: www.prasastiperdamaian.com

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Komunikasi lebih lanjut silahkan email: ypp@prasastiperdamaian.com atau hubungi Fatima Astuti, Managing Director YPP : nona@prasastiperdamaian.com atau (+62) 21 8311207.