

The US exploits “terrorist threats” to step up pressure on Indonesia

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On the first anniversary of the September 11 terror attacks on the US, the Bush administration declared a high-level terrorist alert as part of its efforts to maintain momentum in the “global war on terrorism”. A particular focus of the alert was South East Asia, where several US embassies were shut down.

Justification appeared from two sources. On September 16, the Singapore Home Affairs Ministry issued a statement reporting the arrest of 21 Singapore citizens for alleged terrorist activity, 18 of whom will be detained for at least two years without trial under the country’s notorious Internal Security Act (ISA).

One day earlier, the US-based *Time* magazine published a detailed account of the CIA’s interrogation of Kuwaiti-born Omar al-Faruq. In line with its previous sensational accounts of “Terror in Asia”, the magazine provided lurid, but unsubstantiated, details of links between Al Qaeda and Islamic fundamentalist groups in South East Asia and their plans for attacking US targets in the region, including in Singapore.

While US and Singapore authorities maintained there was no link, the information released in both cases conveniently provided “proof” of connections between Al Qaeda and the Islamic group Jemaah Islamiyah. The timing was also fortuitous. According to *Time*, Omar al-Faruq, who had said nothing for months, finally “broke down” and divulged everything to his CIA interrogators on September 9. The Singapore roundup occurred in August, but was not announced until after the *Time* disclosures.

The events coincided with the capture of Al Qaeda suspect Ramzi Binalshibh and four other men after a shoot out in Karachi on September 11, and the FBI’s arrest of six young Arab-Americans in Lackawanna, New York, on September 13, on completely unsubstantiated allegations that they constituted an Al Qaeda “sleeper cell”. Taken together, these developments have been used by the Bush administration to justify its “war on terrorism” and to claim it is reaping “successes”.

Announcing the recent arrests, the Singapore Home

Affairs statement alleged that 19 of the 21 detainees were Jemaah Islamiyah members and two were connected to the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in the southern Philippines. Three had undergone military training in Afghanistan and one attended MILF training sessions in southern Mindanao.

But none of the detained has been formally charged with any criminal offence. They are accused of reconnoitering targets on Jurong Island off Singapore’s coast—the site of a number of chemical plants, the Defence Ministry, water pipelines from Malaysia and a US warship. The only evidence released has been notes, photos and maps, allegedly seized from the homes of three of the arrested.

US authorities welcomed the arrests. “We appreciate Singapore’s strong support in the campaign against terrorism and continue to engage with the Singaporean government on numerous aspects of the campaign,” a US official in Jakarta declared. Singapore has become an important American regional ally and military base, with around 100 US warships passing through the port each year.

The roundup follows a similar operation in Singapore last December, which resulted in the arrest of 15 people, of whom 13 are still being detained without trial under the ISA. Those detentions, along with others by Malaysian authorities, were the occasion for the US administration and media—with *Time* magazine in the forefront—to mount a sensational campaign claiming that the region as a whole, and Indonesia in particular, had become a sanctuary for Al Qaeda and a hotbed of terrorist activity.

The Singapore government claimed at the time that it had prevented a major terrorist attack using truck bombs on the local diplomatic missions of the US, Britain, Israel and Australia.

The latest allegations have led to renewed demands that the Indonesian administration of President Megawati Sukarnoputri take tougher action against terrorism and in particular, arrest Abu Bakar Bashir, the alleged leader of Jemaah Islamiyah, and others accused of being connected to the organization. But Jakarta has repeatedly refused,

insisting there is no evidence. Bashir, who lives in Yogyakarta, has steadfastly denied the accusations and even threatened legal action against the US for defamation.

The *Time* article purported to provide a detailed account of the activities of al-Faruq and his South East Asian Al Qaeda connections. The 31-year-old Kuwaiti was arrested by Indonesian police near Jakarta on June 5 and shipped out of the country to Afghanistan three days later. He was handed over to US authorities at the Bagram air base north of Kabul for interrogation.

The CIA claims that al-Faruq, who has never been charged or convicted of any offence under US or Indonesian law, is a major figure in the Al Qaeda network. He allegedly took orders directly from senior Al Qaeda officials, including Abu Zubaydah, who is currently being interrogated in the US. His task was to “plan large-scale attacks against US interests in Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Taiwan, Vietnam and Cambodia” to coincide with the September 11 anniversary.

How such operations were to take place remains unclear. The Al Qaeda leadership and bases in Afghanistan had been severely disrupted or destroyed. Pakistani security forces, along with US Special Forces, the CIA and FBI were hunting down suspects in Pakistan. Zubaydah and al-Faruq were in custody. Yet, according to *Time*, “other operatives” would assume responsibilities for planned attacks.

The CIA claimed al-Faruq enlisted Jemaah Islamiah to provide operational and logistic support for the anniversary attacks and that Abu Bakar Bashir authorised the use of the organisation’s resources. Al-Faruq was also supposed to have admitted to being involved in two plots to assassinate Megawati Sukarnoputri—the first during the 1999 elections and the second in August 2001 after she had assumed the presidency.

No supporting evidence has been provided, however, to verify any aspect of the CIA’s report. The “large-scale attacks” carried out by “other operatives” failed to materialise. The information itself is the product of three months of extreme pressure on al-Faruq, if not physical torture. The *Time* article openly admitted that he had been subjected to “psychological interrogation tactics, including prolonged isolation and sleep deprivation.

US officials have wasted no time in renewing demands that Indonesia detain Bashir and shut down Jemaah Islamiah. A senior US official was quoted by the *New York Times* as saying: “[Bashir’s] not just a rabble rouser and trouble maker, but has been directly involved in terrorist activities”. Over the past two weeks, the US ambassador in Jakarta, Ralph Boyce, has held three meetings with 15 Muslim organizations, seeking to persuade them that Al Qaeda is active in Indonesia and has to be dealt with.

On September 17, a senior White House aide, Karen Brooks, was dispatched to Jakarta to convince Megawati to take tougher anti-terrorist measures. Brooks is a former Fulbright scholar in Jakarta and a personal friend of Megawati.

According to the *New York Times*, Brooks’ visit “was to impress on Ms Megawati the seriousness of the problem, but even more important, it was to give some courage to the Indonesia leader, who faces the prospect of widespread demonstrations by Muslims if she cracks down too hard.” The *Far Eastern Economic Review* reported that the US official warned Megawati that, if Jakarta failed, the US would unilaterally put both Bashir and Jemaah Islamiah on its terrorist hit list.

Megawati Sukarnoputri and the military are already collaborating closely with Washington behind the scenes—as indicated by al-Faruq’s arrest and rapid dispatch to Afghanistan. But the Bush administration’s invasion of Afghanistan and its preparations for war against Iraq have generated widespread popular distrust and opposition. There is also deep suspicion about US motives for its anti-terrorist activities in the region and its developing ties with the Indonesian military.

The *Sydney Morning Herald* reported the latest meetings between Boyce and Muslim leaders as follows: “His audience was deeply distrustful of the US administration, skeptical of claims of Al Qaeda operations in Indonesia and hostile to Mr Bush’s plans to attack Iraq. The CIA’s history of covert activities in Indonesia in the 1950s and 1960s was raised repeatedly and the CIA was accused of leaking to *Time* magazine its evidence obtained from al-Faruq to blacken Indonesia’s reputation.”

Solahuddin Wahid, a leader of the Muslim-based Nahdlatul Ulama organisation told the *New York Times* on September 24 that the latest “revelations” were one of Washington’s “propaganda tricks”. “What has been leaked by the CIA is described by many as a mere American scenario to corner Indonesia into nodding to whatever the US is planning to do,” he said.

Whatever the exact truth about the alleged information extracted from the Singapore detainees and al-Faruq, the Bush administration is exploiting the “terrorist threats” to strengthen US political and military clout throughout South East Asia, especially Indonesia.



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