

Religious Rehabilitation Group

RESTORING RELIGIOUS HARMONY



Since the 9/11 attacks of 2001, a rise in religious extremism has threatened global security. How can cities deal with such threats to liveability? **Koh Buck Song** from the Centre for Liveable Cities looks at how Singapore is addressing this issue through the work of the Religious Rehabilitation Group.

⁰¹ In 2001-2002, radical activists from Jemaah Islamiah were detained on suspicion of plots to attack diplomatic missions and a train station.

NEW FACES ON WALKABOUT: PAP may field SGH chief, woman labour leader and doctor PAGE 6

The Straits Times

Monday • October 15, 2001 • 84 Pages in six parts • MTA (P) 02/12/2000 • Established 1845

3 hurt in JB shooting

Racing veteran Ringo Chong (left), diamond dealer Frank Chew and brother in hospital after being shot

COUNTERSTRIKE AGAINST TERRORISM

- Bush assures anxious Americans
- Al-Qaeda warns of more terror

PM: Pull together to overcome threats

Singaporeans urged to do their part to overcome challenges; DPM Lee to head panel to change development strategy

By CHIA LEE HOONG.

ALL Singaporeans must pull together with the Government as one people to overcome national challenges and the threats to the country's stability and prosperity, said Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong last night.

"I ask you to work with the Government to restructure our economy. I ask you to be resilient in our fight against the threats to our prosperity. If we work together as one united people, we will overcome our present difficulties and go on to create a secure and even better Singapore," he said.

Making the call to 1,200 unionists and employers at a dialogue at the Nanyang Polytechnic, he noted that events in the aftermath of the Sept 11 attacks and the American bombing of selected targets in Afghanistan had grave implications for Singapore.

These tested Singapore's social cohesion and deepened its economic problems.

representatives from, among others, the Ministries of Trade and Industry, Manpower, and Finance.

Underlining Singapore's bleak short-term economic prospects, Mr Goh said that despite the Trade and Industry Ministry's 2 to 12 per cent forecast for next year, his own view was that the country would be "lucky" to see any growth at all in the first half of the year.

The Sept 11 attacks, he said, threatens to plunge the world economy into its worst slump since 1973.

Mr Goh said: "We are living in troubled times. The next few months will be the toughest for me since I became Prime Minister."

He pointed out that his intention was not to stoke on Singaporeans' fear "for election purposes", as Pong Poo, AP Chairman See Ewe Teo had alleged, but "because the Government cannot solve all the problems by itself".

In his 40-minute address, Mr Goh also reiterated the need for social cohesion,

which could come under stress as different Singaporeans reacted differently to ongoing American military strikes in Afghanistan.

"We are a multi-racial and multi-religious society, and Singaporeans may not all react in the same way to the same events," he said.

On the whole, however, he was reassured by the way Singaporeans of all races had been reacting.

Unlike in many other countries, non-Muslims here had not looked with suspicion on Muslims, he said.

Muslim leaders too had made clear their stand, he noted, adding that he was "comforted" that local Muslims understood the issues and were not confused by calls coming from the Taliban in Afghanistan for all Muslims to start a jihad against the United States.

"Non-Muslim Singaporeans must not allow the actions and rhetoric of radical Muslim elements outside Singapore to colour their views of our own Muslim community."

He also urged Internet users to refrain from inflammatory remarks.

growth into a sharp dive, from 11 per cent in 1973 to 4 per cent in 1975. Inflation rocketed from 2 per cent in 1973 to 20 per cent in 1975.

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CYBERSPACE CAUTION

"There are Netters, apparently Singaporeans, who expressed glee about the attacks on the US. At the same time, there are others who linked the terrorist attacks to Islam and expressed negative feelings about Islam and Muslims. The potential for such hostilities in cyberspace to boil over to the physical world is real. I urge Netters to be responsible in expressing their views."

— **PM Goh, noting that Internet postings on terrorism and Osama bin Laden have been 'inflammatory'**



FACING SINGAPORE THREATS

PM Goh Chok Tong highlighted these issues, and what is being done.

COHESION: PEOPLE MUST STICK TOGETHER
Social cohesion might come under stress now that the US has attacked terrorist and Taliban targets in Afghanistan.

WE WILL DEAL SERIOUSLY WITH ANYONE WHO TRIES TO EXPLOIT THE CURRENT SITUATION TO INFLAME RELATIONS BETWEEN RACIAL AND RELIGIOUS GROUPS. WE WILL SCRUTINISE ALL INFORMATION RELATED TO INTER-RACIAL INCIDENTS. WE HAVE TO BE ESPECIALLY CAREFUL OF ANY INSENSITIVE ACTION DURING THIS PERIOD.

ECONOMY: PANEL TO DRAW UP NEW STRATEGY
It's looking bleak and uncertain now, but Govt will restructure the economy. DPM Lee Hsien Loong to chair high-level panel to draw up a new development strategy.

WE WILL RECOVER FROM THE ECONOMIC RECESSION - THAT IS CERTAIN.

SECURITY: BE PREPARED, NOT SCARED
Singapore will continue to remain alert. Osama's reach extends to all regions. Terrorists may seek out Singaporeans supporters.

WE HAVE PUT IN PLACE PLANS TO PREVENT TERRORIST ATTACKS, AND TO DEAL WITH THEM SHOULD THEY OCCUR.

GOVT SATISFIED WITH U.S. EVIDENCE AGAINST OSAMA PAGE 3

EXCERPTS OF PM GOH'S SPEECH PAGES 16 & 19

Terrorists tried to recruit S'poreans

By LIDIA LIM.

A MIDDLE-EAST terrorist group tried to cultivate and recruit Singaporean Muslims into its fold.

Making the dramatic revelation last night, Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong said that the Internal Security Department (ISD) uncovered the plot last year.

In the early 1990s, an Indonesian religious teacher, responsible for the 1984 bombing of the ancient Buddhist temple of Borobudur in Java, introduced several Singaporeans to the operations of the Middle Eastern group, to which he belonged.

At least five Singaporeans were said to form a terrorist

cell here and to be prepared to go to war when called upon.

"Fortunately, good sense prevailed among the Singaporeans. They withdrew contact with the foreign operatives," said Mr Goh.

"This experience tells us that even if Singaporeans do not volunteer their services, they may be sought after by others to support the latter's violent plans."

Mr Goh said the terrorist operatives might have planned to attack the United States as two of them had in 1993 conducted a video reconnaissance of the Singapore coastline.

The purpose was "reportedly to assess the viability of a airborne attack against points

ing US naval vessels".

"We have to increase our vigilance against terrorist activities."

"Now that the military action against terrorism has started, there is a danger that radical groups in our part of the world may recruit terrorist acts in our region to support Osama bin Laden," he said.

"Singapore is not immune to terrorist acts, even if we believe like the proverbial three monkeys which see, hear and speak no evil," warned Mr Goh.

He reminded his audience of the 1974 hijacking of the ferry Leju; the 1980 and 1986 bombings of Faber House at Orchard Road, where the Israeli embassy was located; and the 1991 hijacking of a Singapore Airlines flight.

Singapore has put in place plans to prevent terrorist attacks and to deal with them should they occur, as the events of Sept 11 showed that "it is better to be fully prepared than to be sorry afterwards," he said.

Turning to the region, he said that one researcher had found that while the number of terrorist attacks worldwide had fallen in the last few years, the number in Asia had risen from 11 in 1995, to 21 in 1997 and 49 in 1998.

In Malaysia, the Komintern, Mujaahidin Malaysia (KMM), suspected to have links with terrorist master-

mind Osama, were believed to be responsible for at least nine cases of murder, robbery and bombings since 1994.

The opposition in Malaysia had ridiculed the Malaysian government's revelation of KMM as "insular" or a ploy but events had shown that it was a serious problem, said Mr Goh.

The Challenge

"Resilience" is often considered in environmental or social equity terms, such as preparing for natural disasters or addressing wealth gaps. In fact, social resilience also encompasses religious harmony. This connects with a major concern today - religious extremism.

Extremism has become more pervasive in the post-9/11 world. In 2001 and 2002, a number of activists of the radical group Jemaah Islamiyah were arrested under the Internal Security Act for seeking to create chaos in Singapore. Some of them had trained in terrorist camps in Afghanistan. Dealing with such threats is vital to the security of any country. It is especially crucial for small cities like Singapore, whose livelihood depend on keeping its borders open to trade, tourism, investment and, increasingly, immigration.



The Solution

After the Jemaah Islamiah arrests, the Singapore government approached community leaders Ustaz Ali Haji Mohamed and Ustaz Mohamad Hasbi Hassan in 2003 to help counsel the detainees, drawing on their previous work with the Singapore Islamic Scholars and Religious Teachers Association (Pergas) and the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (Muis). The two men enlisted the help of a few Islamic scholars and teachers, and this led to the formation of the Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG).

This voluntary organisation seeks to address the religious aspect of the rehabilitation of those arrested. The two other components in the rehabilitation process are psychological and social. To address the detainees' social needs such as helping their families cope with life while they are under detention, RRG works with a few partner organisations. These community bodies include Khadijah Mosque, Council for the Development of Singapore Malay/Muslim Community (Mendaki), the Singapore

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Malay Youth Library Association (Taman Bacaan) and the Association of Muslim Professionals (AMP).

Integrating former offenders back into normal life requires the support of the rest of the society. In this way, RRG’s work within the Muslim community has many similarities with another secular national initiative called the Yellow Ribbon Project, which aims to change the mindsets of employers and society to give former offenders a second chance in life, to return to their families and find new jobs.

RRG’s resource counselling centre supports research on subjects such as the Syrian conflict, as well as training, public education and information-sharing. Its community outreach has touched thousands of people, including those in schools, churches, community centres and Chinese clan associations. The centre, which has a multimedia visitor gallery, has become a must-see stop on the Geylang community heritage trail for grassroots groups.

RRG’s 39 counsellors spend time with detainees to identify and correct misinterpreted Muslim concepts that have been used to justify political objectives, for example, wrongly applying Quranic verses about “jihad” to advocate random acts of killing. The counsellors also help the detainees better appreciate living amongst Singapore’s multi-racial and multi-religious harmony in a secular state.



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- 01 The Khadijah Mosque on Geylang Road. The community in this mosque are active supporters of RRG’s work and partner closely with them.
- 02 The resource centre serves as space for public education as well as training and research.
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The detainees are usually suspicious at first. They open up only when they realise that the counsellors are not paid government officers, but volunteers who care about the well-being of society and the good name of the Muslim community, according to Ustaz Mohamed Ali, RRG's volunteer vice-chairman, who is an academic at the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research. In a recent interview with *The Straits Times*, he said that RRG's "counter-ideological approach" of re-education works because "no one is born a terrorist, a radical or extremist. It's through a process of radicalisation that these people become like that."

RRG's counsellors are certified by a selection board, and they work towards a specialist diploma in counselling and psychology while doing their work. They have to be well-read in geopolitics and engage effectively in discussions on global developments. For instance, since the recent rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), RRG's outreach has included more online platforms such as a Facebook page, Youtube videos of detainees recanting false ideologies, and a mobile app to provide accurate, scholarly interpretation of the Quran.

The work of RRG is built on a foundation of longstanding trust between the community at large and the government, and also among



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religious communities. As Salim Mohamed Nasir, an academic in international relations and volunteer head of RRG's secretariat, says, "Respect and acceptance of diversity are key. It's about helping one community for the greater good." The Singaporean approach to addressing religious issues has always been supported by a broader country-wide grassroots network. For example, all constituencies have Inter Racial and Religious Confidence Circles, inter-faith groups of leaders who come together to share information and maintain harmony in the community. These networks of people form a system that facilitates quick response and easy communication between groups from different faiths and state organisations in times of need. Such conditions, in some ways unique to Singapore's multi-racial society, facilitate RRG's work of fostering a more cohesive, resilient nation.



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The Outcome

Since 2003, RRG has conducted hundreds of counselling sessions. After months, sometimes years, of counselling, the detainees begin to embrace “wasatiyyah” (moderation) and let go of earlier mistaken beliefs of hate and violence, when the Quran, in fact, condemns suicide and murder. Supervision programmes for former offenders help them break away from violent ideologies and rebuild normal lives.

Singapore has a well-established social network, ready to address extremist threats to society. Since 2002, more than 60 people have been detained for involvement in terrorism-related activities. To date, more than two-thirds have been released. There has been only one case of recidivism so far – and this is a credit to RRG and the Muslim community’s efforts to help nurture the religious harmony that is a vital facet of any liveable city.



Koh Buck Song is an adjunct staff of the Centre for Liveable Cities. He is the author and editor of more than 20 books, on subjects including Singapore’s country branding, economic strategy, manpower development, public housing and energy policy.

- 01 Informational and awareness material produced by RRG are used in the community’s educational and outreach efforts.
- 02 RRG regularly hosts student visits at their Resource and Counselling Centre.