

Despite weak attacks, South-East Asia grappling with ISIS threat

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Jakarta (Indonesia): Even as the rest of the world has seen unprecedented rise in death toll due to multiple terror attacks by ISIS, damage in Southeast Asian countries like Malaysia, Indonesia has been minimal.

This could be attributed to various reasons including lack of expertise or fragmentation of terror group's followers.

But terrorism experts say the threat from the militants, spread across predominantly Muslim Indonesia, Malaysia and the southern Philippines, should not be underestimated and they could be transformed into a more dangerous force by training and leadership.

There are plenty of signs radicals in the region have been animated by IS leader Abu Bakar al Baghdadi's call for attacks and the group's ambition to create Southeast Asian provinces of the IS caliphate even as it loses territory in Syria and Iraq.

A grenade blast at a bar outside Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, in June was acknowledged by police as the first IS attack in the country, where more than 150 people have been detained for involvement with the militant group since 2014. It injured eight people but caused no deaths. Subsequent arrests of people linked to the attack included two police officers.

A suicide bombing directed against police last week in the Indonesian city of Solo killed only the bomber, who police said was a friend of Bahrudin Naim, one of the hundreds of Indonesians with IS in Syria and who has been linked to other plots in Indonesia. Both attacks occurred during the holy month of Ramadan but attracted little notice at a time when a wave of militant violence in several countries, including the U.S., Turkey and Bangladesh, killed about 350 people.

"The IS threat has increased across the region but from a relatively low base," said Sidney Jones, director of the Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict. "We are seeing more connections. The likelihood of communications across national boundaries is higher," she said. "We need to be open to the possibility that both the method and the professionalism of attacks could increase."

So far, the success for IS in Southeast Asia has been the power of its slick propaganda and online savvy to recruit predominantly young followers much more quickly than the face-to-face contact that older militant groups relied on.

A professionally produced IS news site, alfatihin.com, using the Malay language understood throughout Malaysia and Indonesia began publishing in May in an apparent attempt to broaden the group's reach. The power of the group to inspire lone-wolf style attacks such as Orlando or San Bernadino where the perpetrators have no known connections to other radicals is also a potential threat for the region.

"Radical movements are benefiting from information technology," said Brig. Gen. Hamidin, director of prevention at Indonesia's counter-terrorism agency.

Traditional recruitment through indoctrination at Islamic study groups that can be easily detected and monitored by authorities has been replaced by instant messaging and social media, said Hamidin, who goes by one name. "This is the problem we are currently facing."

IS has also attracted the support of long-established networks of fighters. Abu Sayyaf, a group in the southern

Philippines that professes radical Islamic ideology but which is better known for banditry and kidnappings, has declared allegiance to the Islamic State. So too have the militants who follow Santoso, Indonesia's most wanted radical, who is under siege from government forces in his jungle hideout on Sulawesi.

But the attacks IS has inspired in Southeast Asia have had less impact because of the inexperience of the recruits combined with the vigilance of security forces in Malaysia and Indonesia. Plus, many of the hardened Indonesian militants who were part of the Al-Qaeda linked Jemaah Islamiyah network behind the 2002 Bali bombings and other attacks are in prison or opposed to IS ideology and tactics.

Even the Jan. 14 suicide bombing and gun attack by IS followers in the Indonesian capital Jakarta that killed eight people including the four attackers was regarded as amateur by experts and in militant circles.

The June grenade attack near Kuala Lumpur was an example of the low level of IS capability in Malaysia but also a sign it is training to make a bigger impact in the future, said Badrul Hisham Ismail, an analyst with Iman Research, a Malaysian group that studies religion and society.

"The threat level has risen because IS has shifted focus to build an Islamic state in this region," he said.

IS recruitment has become more aggressive and some Malaysian militants have joined Abu Sayyaf in the southern Philippines, Badrul Hisham said.

Indonesians are also known to have joined Abu Sayyaf, making it a potential nexus for the region's militants.

IS released a video in June showing an Indonesian, a Malaysian and a Filipino in Syria acknowledging an Abu Sayyaf leader Isnilon Hapilon as the head of IS in Southeast Asia

According to Jones, the ranks of Abu Sayyaf might in future provide the hardened militant who can train Indonesia's would-be jihadists in bomb making and other skills. Another source could be Indonesian militants released on parole who converted to IS while in prison.

"One would think there would be some introspection among Indonesian leaders in Syria about how to be more effective," she said. "The only answers are training and leadership and the question is where they will come from."

- AP inputs