

The Burden of Terrorism in Malaysia

Azhar Abdul Aziz FRCS (A&E)

National University Hospital, Kuala Lumpur,
Malaysia

Correspondence:
Azhar Abdul Aziz
Department of Emergency Medicine
National University Hospital
Bandar Tun Razak
56000 Cheras
Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
E-mail: azhar@mail.hukm.ukm.my
or: azharlina@hotmail.com

Keywords: emergency medical services; intelligence; kidnapping; Malaysia; mass destruction; peace-loving; security; teaching and training; terrorism; violence

Abbreviations:

ASG = Abu Sayyof Group
ISA Internal Security Act
JI = Jemaah Islamiyah
JRA = Japanese Red Army
KKM = Kumpulan Mujahidin
Malaysia
NGO = Non-Governmental
Organization
US = United States of America

Web Publication: 06 February 2004

Abstract

In the peace-loving, moderate and progressive country of Muslim-dominated Malaysia, violence generally is alien to the culture. Terrorism initially took shape during the post-independence, communist era by jungle recalcitrant actions. In recent years, this has been superseded by a more internationally related trend of violence. Only very few incidents were based locally, while the majority were linked to international groups or organizations abroad, including the Kumpulan Mujahidin Malaysia (KMM), Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), and the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG).

Kidnapping with ransom seemed to have been the most common *modus operandi*, while killing and robbery accounted for very few of these incidents. The number of victims in each event so far has been small, and smaller for those physically harmed or killed. This pattern of terrorist attacks suggests that the current level of provision of emergency medical services is sufficient to handle such incidents. Recent advances in local emergency medicine also have witnessed the establishment of various teaching and training modules, a pivotal role played by university hospitals and supported by the Ministry of Health.

However, the spate of ongoing events of mass destruction such as the conflict in Israel/Palestine, wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the World Trade Center and Pentagon tragedies of 11 September 2001, and the Bali bombing in Indonesia, remain as great concerns to Malaysians. Both the government and the people of Malaysia abhor such unjustified uses of terror, and take every measure to curtail them. The National Security Council policies of Arahan No. 18 and Arahan No. 20 detail specific roles and responsibilities of various agencies in managing terrorism and disasters respectively, while the use of the stern Internal Security Act that allows indefinite detention without trial, evidently has been an efficient intelligence and security apparatus.

With more recent developments of terrorist events regionally and globally, Malaysia continues to face an ongoing threat from such activities. Various measures have been and will be actively undertaken both by government and non-governmental agencies in facing these challenges.

Aziz A A: The Burden of Terrorism in Malaysia. *Prehosp Disast Med* 2003;18(2):115-119.

Introduction

Through a Federation of the former British colonies of Malaya and Singapore, together with the East States of Sabah and Sarawak in Borneo, Malaysia was formed in 1963 (Figure 1). The first initial years saw its history marred by Indonesian efforts to control Malaysia, Philippines' claim to Sabah, and Singapore's secession from the Federation in 1965. Peninsula Malaysia borders with



Prehospital and Disaster Medicine © 2003 Aziz

Figure 1—Map of Malaysia and surrounding regions (reprinted with permission)

Thailand in the north and Singapore in the south, while East Malaysia has Indonesia immediately to its south and Brunei in the central northern part. (Figure 1)

The 23 million population is made up of Malays and other indigenous races (58%), Chinese (24%), Indian (8%), and others (10%) who profess various religions, namely Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Christianity. The country is ruled by a constitutional monarchy system with a democratically elected government, currently headed by the National Front coalition of various political parties.¹

Since independence from the British colonial rule, Malaysia has enjoyed great political, economic, and social stability except for intermittent minor episodes of political unrest from opposing elements and the global economic crisis of the late 1990s.

Burden of Terrorism in Malaysia

In Malaysia, terrorism generally is accepted as the use of force or terror without legal authority or a threat to use force or terror without legal authority. This includes any mode of attack by any person, group, or country, for whatever motive, intention, or justification, aimed against a country or her citizens or properties, be public or private properties, or against important services. The action can be by whatever means that jeopardizes public security or peace or other basic necessities of a country, which has been

intended or planned to create fear in a specific person or people. Included in its understanding, is the use of force against the government or an international organization, to act or not to act, or to support such decisions either directly or indirectly.²

Fortunately, Malaysia has experienced a limited number of terrorist-related events. In the post-independence period between the late 1950s and the 1970s, these largely were due to communist groups, mainly from dissatisfied, anti-Malay-rule, ethnic Chinese, based in the tropical jungles of the country. However, their strength, resources, and support were very limited, and through both military means and psychological strategy of winning the hearts and minds of their supporters, they effectively have been defeated by the ruling government.³

During the last three decades, a spate of terrorist-related incidents has been observed with increasing frequency, especially during the last five years. A summary of important events is follows:

1. Ten members of the Japanese Red Army (JRA) took over the United States' Consulate in the capital city of Kuala Lumpur in August 1975. A total of 52 people, mainly United States of America (US) Embassy staff, were taken hostage for the exchange of JRA prisoners in Japan, and a threat was made to kill them and blow-up the Consulate building. The Japanese government ful-

filled these demands by releasing the prisoners and transferring them to Tripoli, Libya through Kuala Lumpur.⁴

2. The Malaysian High Commissioner to Peru was kidnapped by members of the Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Movement in Lima. The siege ended with the safe release of the Commissioner and other hostages.
3. Following an arms heist from an army camp, 27 men were kidnapped by a group said to be the Islamic cult, Al-Ma'unah (Brotherhood of Inner Power) in Sauk, in the northern state of Perak. Two hostages were reported killed before anti-terrorist commandos raided their jungle camp and overpowered the group.⁵
4. Nine Malaysians and 21 (mixed) non-Malaysians were kidnapped from Kampong Pulau Tiga in the resort island of Sipadan, Sabah on 24 April 2000. They were taken hostage to Jolo Island in the southern Philippines by the Abu Sayyaf Group.^{6,7}
5. A Southern Bank in Petaling Jaya, Selangor was robbed by a few persons believed to be linked to the Kumpulan Mujahidin Malaysia (KMM) on 18 May 2001.²
6. Three Malaysians were kidnapped from the Pandanan Island in Sabah on 10 September 2001, and were taken hostage to Jolo Island in the southern Philippines.²
7. On 05 October 2003, six people were kidnapped by a group of 10 gunmen at the Borneo Paradise Eco Farm in Sabah and taken hostage to Tawi Tawi Island in the southern Philippines.

To date, there has been little evidence of the existence of local terrorist groups in Malaysia. Most of the recorded incidents have pointed towards international groups, or groups based outside Malaysia, or those undertaken by members of international groups residing in the country. Available accounts of such groups are limited and a brief summary is provided below:

a. Kumpulan Mujahidin Malaysia (KMM)

Initially branded as Kumpulan Militan Malaysia (Malaysian Militant Group), the Kumpulan Mujahidin Malaysia (Malaysian Warriors' Group) is reported to favour the overthrow of the Mahathir government and the creation of a regional Islamic state. Forty-eight alleged members currently are being held by the Malaysian authorities under the Internal Security Act (ISA), a much-protested-against act that allows detention without trial. Their activities have been said to be deemed threatening to the country's security, including planning for warfare, possession of weaponry, etc. Several of the arrested members reportedly had been undergoing training abroad, while others are alleged to have ties with international extremist organizations.⁸

b. Jemaah Islamiyah (JI)

Based in Indonesia, the Jemaah Islamiyah (Islamic Movement) is said to have cells operating throughout South East Asia, with a primary goal of creating an Islamic State comprised of Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, and the southern Philippines. Some of its members recently arrested in Singapore, Malaysia, and the Philippines are reported to have links with Al-Qaeda.⁹

c. Al-Ma'unah

Al-Ma'unah (Brotherhood of Inner Power) is a non-governmental organization involved in the teaching of martial arts, particularly the development of one's inner powers and the practice of Islamic traditional medicine. It is said to have >1,000 members in Malaysia and overseas.⁵

d. Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG)

As a splinter group of the Moro National Liberation Front but with no ties to the Moro Islamic Liberation Front in the southern Philippines islands of Mindanao, Basilan, Jolo, and Tawi-Tawi, the ASG is said to have members with experience in the Middle East and the Russian invasion of Afghanistan. Most of its activities seem to have focused on anti-American/anti-western style of kidnapping (tourists and others) and demanding ransoms, and occasionally on killings.⁷

Emergency Management of Terrorist Events

Any event of a terrorist-related nature comes directly under the authority of the National Security Council of the National Security Division under the Prime Minister's Department. The management and operations of such events are dealt with by government policies (Order No. 18 on Terrorism and Order No. 20 on Disasters) that systematically delineate goals and responsibilities of various government and non-governmental agencies. These include: (1) the Royal Malaysia Police; (2) Malaysian Armed Forces (including the Air Force and Navy); (3) Fire and Rescue Department; (4) The Home, Foreign, and Health Ministries; (5) Malaysian Red Crescent Society; (6) Special Malaysia Disaster Assistance and Rescue Team; and (7) a number of corporations. In special circumstances, specific groups are identified and activated, such as the Negotiation, Emergency Response, and Assault Teams, with ultimate roles of saving hostages, properties, and at the same time, capturing or riding-off the terrorists. The role of the emergency medical team(s) is limited to the provision of emergency medical management of casualties including prehospital and hospital care. The stand of the Malaysian government always has been clear and firm, where stern measures have and always will be employed. The principles of handling terrorists include rejection of any form of terrorism, protection of lives and properties of hostages, solution through negotiations, avoidance of exchange of hostages as ransom, and use of assault forces as a final measure, should negotiations fail.²

In October 2001, a US report revealed that a letter sent from Malaysia to the Microsoft office in Carson City, Nevada, was found to be positive for traces of anthrax. The Malaysian Government, through her Foreign Ministry, responded by taking this matter very seriously and cooperated with the US authorities in investigating the matter. In October the next year, a row was incited by the works of a Sri Lankan writer, whose book *Inside Al-Qaeda, Global Network of Terror*, contained charts of Al-Qaeda's networks. These charts were said to be included in the United Nations' Second Report of the Monitoring Group

Established Pursuant to Security Council Resolution 1363 (2002) that implicated not only Malaysian Islamic-based groups, but also the ruling party of Barisan Nasional (National Front).¹⁰ The Malaysian Government protested strongly against this, and the report was later retracted. At the APEC Meeting in October 2002, the then Deputy Prime Minister agreed on behalf of Malaysia, to set up a non-military training Centre for Combating Terrorism in Malaysia.

Malaysia currently enjoys the legacy of the communist-era Internal Security Act, an act that has proven highly effective against terrorism and even suspected ones, including members of the Kumpulan Mujahidin Malaysia (KMM).

A national-level, terrorist-disaster mock drill was conducted in the northeastern state of Terengganu in July 2002. Code-named Exercise Rampas, this was a huge operation involving some 100 casualties and 2,000 personnel from multiple agencies. The exercise mimicked a terrorist attack of exploding a petrochemical plant and kidnapping of hostages, followed by abduction via the sea, explosion of a vessel en-route, and a final assault and capturing of the hostages on a resort island off the Terengganu coast. Involvement of the medical team was manifold. Moulage make-up of the casualties was provided by the Department of Emergency Medicine of the National University Hospital, while provision of prehospital and hospital emergency medical services was by the local State Health Department. Sea rescue of injured victims was a joint effort by the Special Hospital Aquatic ResQ (SHARQ Team of the National University Hospital), Marine Division of the Fire and Rescue Department, and the Marine Police. The whole exercise ended with a dramatic assault by the Special Action Forces and capture of the 'terrorists'.

Critical appraisal of the exercise identified many shortcomings from the medical services' point of view. As usual, communication (system and practice) remained a major flaw, including inter-agency coordination. The emergency pre-hospital services faced numerous challenges with many local obstacles, such as manpower, equipment and vehicles, local geography, and traffic. Inexperience with such events by medical staff, especially those attending to casualties on-site and at the "terrorists' camp," was very evident, which somewhat contributed to more 'fear' and confusion. Coordination of the local hospitals and health centers was impeded by some degree of chaos with such an uncommon magnitude of casualties. Despite these, gains from the exercise were many: flaws were identified and proposals made to overcome them. Potential dangers to the different agencies were recorded, unfamiliarity with such 'rare' events was exposed to most of the relevant agencies, involvement and coordination of various agencies were strengthened, and most of all, disaster preparedness for similar future incidents registered a significant achievement.

The pattern of terrorist-related events in Malaysia suggests that such attacks rarely require more than the local systems of emergency medical response. Recent advancements during the past decade have seen a number of developments in the field of Emergency Medicine in Malaysia. These include the existence of qualified emergency physicians, establishment of training modules such as the Basic

and Advanced Trauma Care, Aquatic Rescue, Mass Casualty Management, Emergency Medical Technician (EMT), postgraduate Masters Programme in Emergency Medicine, and the production of more emergency physicians for the country. In addition, academic seminars and conferences on related themes have been held locally on a regular basis. The role played by university hospitals whose main forte include teaching and training, plus the support from the Ministry of Health and other relevant bodies, have been pivotal in such developments.

On the same note, a significant contribution has come from non-governmental bodies with experience in disaster-stricken areas. In particular is the Malaysian Medical Relief Society (MERCY Malaysia), which is a non-profit, medical and humanitarian relief organization established in 1999, sparked-off after the Balkan crisis in Kosova. To date, both medical and non-medical volunteers of this organization have a relatively wide experience locally and abroad. Included are crisis areas of Kosova, Moluccas Islands of Indonesia, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Palestine, on top of natural disaster areas such as India, Cambodia, and Sri Lanka. Support from the Malaysian authorities and the public has been tremendous, such as the RM 6 million (US\$1.5 million) financial assistance from the Malaysian Government in the Iraqi-victims assistance project.¹¹

Future Risk of Terrorism

Terrorism in whatever form generally is deplored, both by the Malaysian multi-racial and multi-religious public and the government, the majority of whom are Muslims. The use of unnecessary force and unjustified terror is widely rejected by most of the mainstream religions professed in the country. Despite the previous harmonious Malaysian history, terrorism, in particular that with international links, has the potential to recur.

Malaysia has emerged as an economic miracle in the region, perhaps adding an 'attraction' to the refuge of terrorist or terrorist-related activities. In this Muslim-majority and peace-loving country, the fact remains that many citizens, including non-Muslims, abhor what is felt to be the unjustified use of force by the United States and/or its allies against Muslims, namely in Afghanistan, Palestine, and Iraq. Other tragedies, as in the massacres of Muslims in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, and Chechnya, just to name a few, add to the ongoing resentment toward the "West", previously seen to be the champions of human rights' issues. The act of many who automatically and quite indiscriminately equate all terrorists with Muslims, when the actual true teachings of Islam are completely the opposite, only further the feeling of disgrace and rejection towards them. Even with all this in mind, the future risk of terrorism in the moderate, progressive, and peace-loving Muslim country of Malaysia remains at a relatively low level.

The October 2002 Bali bombing of foreigners resulting in a huge toll of casualties and destruction in Indonesia remains of great concern to Malaysia and her citizens. Its geographical proximity to Malaysia, and the implicated members of Jemaah Islamiyah, some members of who were arrested within the boundaries of Malaysia, have made

both the people and the government more vigilant in their security measures.

Future challenges

Political, economic, and social (cultural and religious) stability throughout the years have given multi-racial and

multi-religious Malaysia the necessary strength to curb and overcome terrorist-related events. Given the developments occurring within the region and globally throughout the world, the risk posed by these, however, is real and is anticipated to continue. Various measures have and will continue to be undertaken, both by the government and NGO agencies in facing this ongoing threat of terrorism.

References

1. Central Intelligence Agency, Malaysia: *CIA World Fact Book Web site*. Available at: www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/. Accessed 25 October 2003.
2. National Security Council, National Security Division, Prime Minister's Department of Malaysia. 2002.
3. Honorable Dato Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, "Islam, Terrorism and Malaysia's Response" by Prime Minister of Malaysia. Available at: www.asi-society.org/speeches/. Accessed 17 October 2003.
4. Terrorist Attacks. August (day unknown), 1975: Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, and Tripoli, Libya. The Terrorism Research Center Web site. Available at: www.terrorism.com/. Accessed 25 October 2003.
5. Religious cults and sects, doctrines and practices. Al-Ma'unah. Apologetics Web site. Available at: www.apologeticsindex.org/. Accessed 29 October 2003.
6. Terrorist Attacks. 24 April 2000: Kampong Pulau Tiga, Malaysia. The Terrorism Research Center Web site. Available at: www.terrorism.com/. Accessed 25 October 2003.
7. Terrorist Group Profile. Abu Sayyaf Group. The Terrorism Research Center web site. Available at: www.terrorism.com/. Accessed 25 October 2003.
8. Terrorist Group Profiles. Kumpulan Mujahidin Malaysia (KMM). The Terrorism Research Center Web site. Available at: www.terrorism.com/. Accessed 25 October 2003.
9. Terrorist Group Profiles. Jemaah Islamiya (JI). The Terrorism Research Center Web site. Available at: www.terrorism.com/. Accessed 25 October 2003.
10. Statement by Dr Tan Seng Giaw, DAP National Vice-Chairman and MP for Kepong on 18 October 2002 in Kuala Lumpur. Malaysia Web site. Available at: www.malaysia.net. Accessed 17 October 2003.
11. The Malaysian Medical Relief Society. MERCY Malaysia Web site. Available at: www.mercy.org.my. Accessed 25 October 2003.