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Al-Qaeda-linked militants in Philippines get foreign funds despite crackdown

MANILA - AL-Qaeda-linked militants in the Philippines continue to get significant funding from foreign donors despite a crackdown aimed at stopping the flow of cash that finances bombings and other attacks, two terrorism experts said on Monday.

'There is no evidence that terrorist financial flows to the Philippines have dried up,' Dr Rohan Gunaratna, a Singapore-based terrorism expert, told reporters on the sidelines of a Manila conference on terror financing.

But he said the militants also use extortion and kidnappings for ransom as a means of supplementing the foreign funding, which isn't always enough to carry out all of their planned terrorist attacks in the country.

Philippine military and police officials have said that the Abu Sayyaf, a small but brutal group accused of involvement in bombings, beheadings and kidnappings, suffered a major financial setback when its chief, Khaddafy Janjalani, and his presumed successor, Abu Sulaiman, were killed in 2006 and 2007, respectively.

The two leaders had established connections with Middle Eastern and Asian financiers, something most other Abu Sayyaf commanders have failed to do, the officials said.

The fundraising task, however, has been taken over by a little-known Abu Sayyaf commander, Yassir Igasan, who developed links with Middle Eastern financiers when he went there for terrorist training in the past, said Gunaratna, author of 'Inside Al-Qaeda: The Global Network of Terror.'

'As long as he is alive and as long he is active, the Abu Sayyaf will continue to get money from Saudi Arabia,' Dr Gunaratna said of Igasan.

Top Indonesian terrorism suspect Umar Patek, who has been hiding in the southern Philippines, also gets funds from Indonesia-based groups such as Jemaah Islamiyah that are used by the Abu Sayyaf and other Muslim rebel groups for terrorist training and attacks in the Philippines, Gunaratna said.

National police chief Avelino Razon declined to comment on Gunaratna's claim, saying a lack of information on terror financing has made it hard for authorities to assess the flow of money to local militants.

But he said that in the past some of those funds have been monitored and frozen with the help of foreign intelligence agencies.

Mr Razon acknowledged the Abu Sayyaf remains a key security threat.

'They're still a force that we should guard. They will not stop. That means eternal vigilance on our part,' Mr Razon said.

Mr Arabinda Acharya, an expert with the Singapore-based International Center for Political Violence and Terrorism Research, told the Manila conference that government efforts to stop the flow of funds to terrorist groups in the southern Philippines have been hampered by militants using informal channels such as couriers, instead of the banking system, to move most of their money.

That has led to a sharp drop in the amount of bank-transferred funds being detected in recent years by anti-terrorism officials worldwide, he said. -- AP

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