



IDSS COMMENTARIES (12/2006)

IDSS Commentaries are intended to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy relevant background and analysis of contemporary developments. The views of the authors are their own and do not represent the official position of IDSS.

FOUR YEARS AFTER Is Bush Winning the War on Terror?

Haseenah Koyakutty*

15 February 2006

FOUR-AND-a-half years into the war on terror and three-and-a-half to go before the Bush administration runs its full term. President Bush could not wait to hail the war a great success.

America has not been attacked in that time, several terror plots were foiled, Al Qaeda is split and on-the-run and US allies are cooperating like never before, according to the President. And so Mr Bush concluded in his recent speech to the National Guard Association: “We’re winning the war on terror.” Really? Missing was the “Mission Accomplished” banner. But the message sounded somewhat like the ill-timed Iraq victory call in 2003 when the President declared major combat operations over.

Given the Senate hearing on the correctness of wiretapping at the time of the speech, the President was expected to vigorously make his case in the progress report. Mr Bush’s update on key results, however, came at a sensitive period when Muslims everywhere are agitated – the spillover from the sensational cartoon saga is still surreal -- and the rest of the world is restive. It is a condition that has been ignored in the assessment.

A New Bogey

At this juncture of tense uncertainty, a new bogey emerged with the startling revelation of the West Coast bombing plot. The world and Asia are still digesting the enormity of the post 9/11 plan -- to lop-off LA’s tallest tower by Asian and Saudi terrorists -- and the gravity of the latest intelligence. No one really knows what to fully make of it yet. The plot was first known in October last year and it is unclear why the details from the White House have only surfaced now.

What is clear is that it was premature for President Bush to blithely take credit. The President’s war on terror scorecard overstated the hits; he acknowledged few of the misses even though he recognised “we still have a long way to go”. The reality has been a series of blunders, far more serious than Mr Bush’s Freudian slip of LA’s ‘Library Tower’ (now named the Bank Tower) which he uttered as ‘Liberty Tower’ in his Freedom-on-the-March mantra.

The bungling, from Guantanamo to Abu Ghraib, is old news, though still relevant. The mishandling of another controversial case in Asia is just as bad in its double standards and duplicity, but less widely publicised. This has to do with a little known but lethal Indonesian

terrorist named Hambali who has remained in US custody since August 2003.

Hambali is wanted in Indonesia mainly for his role as Captain in the 2002 Bali bombings that killed 202 people, 88 of them Australians. Many are aware of Hambali's notoriety but we have just found out *how* notorious.

Mr Bush said he collaborated with Khalid Shaikh Mohammad -- the mastermind of the 9/11 - - to bring down the Library Tower weeks after September 11. "Rather than use Arab hijackers as he had on September 11th, Khalid Shaikh Mohamad sought out young men from Southeast Asia -- whom he believed would not arouse as much suspicion."

Mr Bush added the plan went awry after several Southeast Asian nations came together to thwart it and Hambali was eventually arrested in Thailand in 2003. Mr Bush did not name the countries involved but he did describe Southeast Asia as the "second front" in the war on terror after the Middle East, early in the battle.

Backfiring of US stance

And here's the thing -- the US government's lack of cooperation with the Indonesians in this matter, especially over access to Hambali, has backfired in profound ways.

Public opinion in Indonesia is skeptical at best of the insidious nature of home-grown terrorist cells. They are still perceived by some in Indonesia's countryside as no more than a preachers' circle. Many others believe that secular governments are out to discredit Islam (witness the cartoon outrage). This lingering suspicion makes it difficult for the Indonesian government to be tougher and speedier in its anti-terror crackdown.

Indonesia discovered the reach of these local cells after the Bali bombings. To this day, the authorities are trying to persuade its largely Muslim population (the largest in the world) that the "J.I." network exists and that it is one and the same with Al Qaeda.

The Indonesian government has repeatedly requested the Bush administration for Hambali to be handed over, for access and for information. Hambali is among the few Asians in Osama Bin Laden's inner circle. Anti-terror officials there think Hambali's testimonies may smash an all-important psychological barrier in further influencing mindsets in Indonesia's vast democracy -- discounting those local Islamists who would predictably make Hambali out to be a US agent and puppet.

Although the Pentagon has granted the Indonesian authorities access to Hambali, the information-sharing has been limited, according to Indonesia's senior anti-terror officials. In fact, Hambali has yet to be handed over.

Washington has often maintained that Indonesia's weak legal system makes it difficult to extradite Hambali. But that sounds hollow following the fantastic escape late last year of Omar al-Farouq, a Kuwaiti terrorist suspect who was captured in Indonesia and handed over to the US. The Pentagon later confirmed media reports that al-Farouq and three others picked prison locks near the US Bagram military base in Afghanistan and the four fugitives even bypassed a mine field as they fled.

'Liberty Tower' is great, but freedom without follow-ups is mere lip service. One set of rules

for the US to serve its own interest and another for the world are not enduring values; it undermines what America stands for.

Mr Bush contends in his progress report that “in the long run, victory (in the war on terror) will require more than military means alone”. In the critical and larger battle for hearts and minds, an attack-free America since 9/11 is false comfort. How far have we really come in the war on terror? Four-and-a-half years later, Mr Bush rightly said: “We remain at war.” There are just too many more battles to fight.

* Haseenah Koyakutty is a Visiting Public Diplomacy Fellow at the Institute of Defence & Strategic Studies, Nanyang Technological University.