

Asia militants get more sophisticated online

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Southeast Asian militants have grown more sophisticated in using the Internet to spread radical ideas, recruit and train supporters, according to a new study urging governments to take action.

The Internet's role as a training and recruitment tool is likely to increase in significance and could threaten the region if it is not countered effectively, the study said.

"To put it bluntly: security agencies may detect the bomb manuals, but miss the process of radicalisation that produces the bombers," says the joint report from Singapore's S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies and the Australian Strategic Policy Institute.

It indicates that terrorist groups in the region are becoming increasingly sophisticated in their use of the Internet, posting hacking and bomb-making videos, and even developing their own online media units.

"Terrorist groups in Southeast Asia are increasingly using the Internet as a means to radicalise people as well as to recruit and train supporters," said the study, made available to journalists at the weekend.

"Using this international platform, they're attempting to shape people's ideas about whose ideology is right and who should win.

"Importantly, they are not attacking only the West but are drawing on their narrative to attack the governance arrangements of regional states."

Southeast Asia is home to extremist groups such as Jemaah Islamiyah, blamed for a string of deadly bomb attacks in the region including the 2002 attacks on Bali, and the Abu Sayyaf in the southern Philippines.

The Abu Sayyaf has gained prominence by kidnapping foreigners, most recently a group of Red Cross workers, one of whom is still being held.

The number of radical websites detected and monitored by the report's authors numbered 117 in 2008, up sharply from only 15 in 2007.

Governments and national law enforcement agencies in Southeast Asia "have done little to stop the rise of online radicalisation" compared with Europe, the Middle East and North America, the paper said.

It suggested that "understanding and countering online radicalisation must be one of the main pillars of the fight against regional terrorism."

The study also warned that militant groups are putting greater emphasis on preaching their message to young people and use not just websites but social networking sites as well.

Online extremism was first detected in Southeast Asia in early 2000, in particular on websites using Bahasa Indonesia and other variations of the Malay language, the study said.

Radicals initially tried to mimic the contents and features of their counterparts in the Middle East, but are now becoming more sophisticated, the study said.

"Many of the Bahasa Indonesia and Malay language websites have been used as online platforms to justify terrorist acts and propagate conspiracy theories," it said.

More recently, they have disseminated instructions on hacking and making bombs and firearms, followed by more sophisticated video manuals of these dangerous crafts.

Southeast Asian militant groups have also developed their own online media units that operate like international news agencies, the study said.

These media units provide up-to-the-minute updates on developments worldwide presented from their own perspective, and offer exclusive pictures and interviews.

"By emulating established media news outlets, they hope to narrow the credibility gap between themselves and the established news media so that more people will tune in to their radical Islamist version of world affairs," the study said.

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