A TROUBLING SENSE OF DEJA VU

The feds are scrambling to address new terrorism threats in both Asia and Africa

By Chitra Ragavan

ED WRAY—AP

A police officer standing guard outside a shop in Kuta, Bali, after the Oct. 1, 2005, bombing

Last October, as they investigated a deadly suicide bombing at tourist-packed restaurants in Bali, Indonesian police got what seemed like an important, albeit grim, investigative break: They recovered the decapitated and swollen heads of three of the suicide bombers. At the Indonesian government's request, FBI forensic experts in Washington digitally reconstructed the bombers' faces using sophisticated biometrics. But when Indonesian police distributed the FBI photos along with the original headshots, looking for help in their investigation, no one came forward.

The failure to identify the Bali bombers highlights the conundrum that FBI and other law enforcement and intelligence agencies face: how to track the movement of radical Islamist terrorists in the vast string of islands of Southeast Asia, where poverty and ethnic and religious strife have resulted in a surge of Islamic fundamentalism. "You have tens of thousands of islands with no contact with each other, minimal contact with mass media, and few policing services," says Thomas Fuentes, special agent in charge of the FBI's office of international operations, "making them a fertile area for recruiting, training, and deploying suicide bombers."

Two-front war. Half a world away, those same concerns apply to another vast, underdeveloped, and largely unpoliced land—Africa. The African continent has long been a stepchild of U.S. foreign policy, especially the nations of North Africa and one in particular: Somalia. Each week, there are two charter flights from Dubai to Bosaaso, a port city in northern Somalia, ferrying cash, weapons, and jihadists into the largely ungoverned country, where the reigning Islamic cleric is believed to have pledged loyalty, or *bayat,* to Osama bin Laden. A recent jihadist recruiting video shows Somali Islamic and non-Somali Arab radicals fighting U.S.-backed secular warlords in Mogadishu; now those radical Islamic warlords seem to be in charge. "It's the same type of scenario we saw in Afghanistan as the Taliban were consolidating control," says J. Peter Pham, an Africa expert at James Madison University. "I have a great sense of déjà vu."

And so does the Bush administration. At the Pentagon, the CIA, the State Department, and the FBI, there is a heightened sense of urgency about these threats and an energetic set of new efforts to prevent these lawless lands from becoming hotbeds of terrorism. But critics wonder whether it's already too late. "We haven't put our resources in there; we haven't asked the right questions," says Pham. "Our commitment to date has been minimal."

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And yet, the U.S. government long has known that these regions are fraught with peril. Several major attacks or plots against U.S. targets have had some link to the Philippines, including mid-1990s plots to blow up 11 American airliners over Asia and to assassinate Pope John Paul II and President Bill Clinton, and the 9/11 attacks, which also were traced, in part, to Malaysia. As for Africa, three of the four suspects who tried but failed to pull off a second round of attacks on London's commuter trains last July came from Somalia, Ethiopia, and Eritrea.

Now officials are scrambling to address the threats. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice traveled to North Africa and Southeast Asia earlier this year to strengthen military cooperation with key allies there. At the FBI, Director Robert Mueller has tasked Fuentes with creating a "global FBI." Over the past five years, the FBI has almost doubled its presence in these regions, expanding the bureau's reach to nearly 20 countries—including Nigeria, Egypt, Kenya, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Morocco, Australia, Hong Kong, the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and India. The bureau is considering opening offices in New Zealand, Fiji, Ethiopia, Algeria, Ghana, Cambodia, and Bangladesh.

But the political and diplomatic hurdles are substantial. Each office costs millions

of dollars to establish and equip. And the FBI has long struggled to recruit and train G-men with the know-how to effectively work in these regions—language skills especially, plus the necessary historical, geopolitical, religious, and cultural sensitivities. In addition, some of these countries are resistant to allowing much of a U.S. law enforcement presence.

The ground zero of terrorism in the region is the Indonesian archipelago, with 17,500 islands, a 90 percent Muslim population, and a big regional terrorist organization, Jemaah Islamiyah. Since 9/11, JI—like al Qaeda—has been fragmented but by no means vanquished. "There's a concern that instead of the organizations we all know and love, there will be small groups not on anybody's radar screen," says Sidney Jones, Southeast Asia project director for the nonprofit International Crisis Group, "that will plan and undertake suicide attacks." The terrorist camps in the southern Philippines, which Indonesian jihadists use for combat training, present another huge problem, as does the recent spate of bombings in rural south Thailand—triggered by anger toward the Bangkok government for failing to serve and protect the poor Muslim Malay minority. "It's the kind of thing," says Jones, "that if it's allowed to fester, you'll see people coming from the outside, wanting to help their Muslim brethren."

Ripe. A recent phenomenon of Islamic militants migrating from Thailand through the porous border into Cambodia is also worrisome. "You have a poor peasant population susceptible to anybody promising a better way," says Fuentes. "In the 1960s, it was the Viet Cong and Khmer Rouge. The question is whether those same peasant areas are now ripe for Islamic fundamentalism."

An Indonesian-born al Qaeda operative, Riduan Isamuddin—known as Hambali—certainly believed so. A former JI operations chief and close confidant of bin Laden's, Hambali—who masterminded the 2002 Bali bombing—lived in Cambodia for six months and plotted to bomb the American, British, and Australian embassies in Phnom Penh. He later aborted the plan and fled to Thailand, where he was captured in a 2002 joint CIA-Thai operation and "rendered" to an undisclosed country. In Africa, U.S. officials are monitoring the Saharan jihadist pipeline bringing Islamists from Morocco, Algeria, Libya, Tunisia, and Egypt into Iraq to fuel the insurgency against U.S. military forces. "About a quarter of the jihadists we picked up in Iraq are coming out of Africa," says Dennis Pierce, chief of the FBI's Africa Unit. The jihadists who return to Africa are trained, connected, and battle hardened. "It's a short hop from the African countries either into Italy or the south of Spain or Portugal," says Fuentes. "And once you are in Europe, it's a direct flight into the U.S." ●

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BUCKING CONVENTION

Congress and Bush seek a deal on terrorism detainees

By Scott Michels and Chitra Ragavan

The Supreme Court's landmark decision last month striking down President Bush's military tribunals made clear that Congress and the administration will have to work together to craft a new system for trying terrorism suspects. But just how difficult that will be is only now becoming clear. As Congress took up the issue last week, the results were hardly encouraging.

The court found the military tribunals illegal under both U.S. law and Article Three of the Geneva Conventions, which provide basic protections for wartime prisoners. The decision forces Bush to use established forms of military justice like courts-martial or get Congress to craft new rules for military tribunals.

Reversal. Bowing to the court, the administration conceded for the first time last week that Article Three applies to all of its terrorism detainees—reversing a policy set out in 2002. It was the latest in a larger retreat from the theory that Bush alone may decide how to interrogate and try detainees. "This is part of a realization that real mistakes have been made in our basic approach to the war on terror," says retired military judge Gary Solis.

At the same time, some in the administration tried to limit the impact of the court's decision—setting up clashes in Congress and within the administration at high-level meetings expected this week. "It will be an interesting litmus test," says a government official familiar with the discussions. "Do we still want to do it our way, or are we willing to work with Congress?"

A sign of protest at a Senate Judiciary Committee hearing on detainees

MATTHEW B. SLABY FOR *USN&WR*

In hearings last week, Daniel Dell'Orto, the Defense Department's principal deputy general counsel, advised Congress to approve the current tribunals, which allow secret evidence to be used. House Republicans appeared willing to go along—which would almost certainly prompt another court challenge. But senators from both parties balked, preferring a system based on normal rules of military justice, as recommended by top lawyers within the military. Senate Armed Services Committee Chair John Warner says White House national security adviser Stephen Hadley privately told him the administration will support the Senate plan.

Another sticking point will be interrogations. The Justice Department warned that Article Three, which prohibits "humiliating and degrading" treatment, could expose interrogators to criminal charges. Some senators agreed, suggesting Congress may alter U.S. law to permit controversial techniques.

The debate may only get more intense. Senate leaders don't expect a vote on the issue until after Labor Day—when the election-year atmosphere is sure to be poisonous. In the meantime, the fates of hundreds of detainees hang in the balance. Says Warner, "The eyes of the world are upon us." ●