

"Updates on Asia's War on Terror" AIM W-B Global Distance Learning Center Ground Floor, AIM Campus, Paseo de Roxas, Makati City

By: Maria A. Ressa

Seeds of Terror is the result of living in the region for nearly 18 years. Although it took me about three months to write, I could not have come to these conclusions if I hadn't been there – at every bombing attack, at every riot, at every people power revolt – I can really say – the good times and the bad. I lived through it. That's my foundation. My ideas are also the result of about two and a half years of research after the September 11 attacks, of sifting through documents from intelligence agencies across the region and other western countries, including Canada and the United States. Working on finding these links between our homegrown groups in Southeast Asia and Al-Qaeda showed me a lot: the gaps in communication, how crucial information could sometimes get lost – not just between nations, but within each country ... not because of any grand design, but because the bureaucracy wasn't set up to handle it. Immediately after 9/11, everyone was scrambling to get information, trying to reorganize to help information flow, but although it's gotten better, there's still a long way to go. That is also a reality. September 11 changed the world because it ripped off a veneer – a collective lie we had built in the West of post-Cold war peace – and exposed what had been going on beneath the surface worldwide: how the growth of radical Islam had been hijacked and fuelled by groups like Al-Qaeda to build a global terrorist network. 9/11 changed not just the way I look at the world today, but the way I looked at the past – events of senseless violence I'd lived through now made sense as I went back and traced their connections to this global jihad. When I saw the first plane crash into the World Trade Center, it was familiar. I remembered this from somewhere. It took the second plane crash to jar my memory. I remembered a terrorist plot discovered in the Philippines in 1995 so fantastic no one reported it, not journalists like myself, not the FBI, not the CIA. As it later turned out, Philippine police busted one of the first Al-Qaeda cells in Southeast Asia. The names are now familiar: Ramzi Yousef, the mastermind behind the first World Trade Center attack in 1993; his uncle, Khalid Shaikh Mohammed, who carried out his nephew's vision of destroying the World Trade Center towers. These men in 1995 were in the Philippines plotting to assassinate the Pope, Bill Clinton. The plot we all reported then was Oplan Bojinka – or Big Bang – a plot to bomb US airplanes flying from Asia. The plot we ignored because it seemed too fantastic – to hijack commercial planes and crash them into buildings. The targets in 1995: the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, the Sears Building in Chicago and the TransAmerica building in San Francisco. I filed that report less than a week after 9/11. It was quickly downplayed by US officials. The FBI denied it had the information Philippine authorities told me they had passed on – a position the FBI later reversed. The world moved on, but I couldn't. It was the beginning of the dual realities I began to see: the gap between the public rhetoric of government officials and the reality I began to piece together because I had lived through it. This frustration built because I saw that gap in country after country I was reporting from: in Indonesia leading up to the Bali blasts in Oct 2002, in the Philippines when it came to pinpointing the terrorist links of the country's largest Muslim separatist group, the MILF – and then the growing links between Jemaah Islamiyah and the Abu Sayyaf. I had another personal reason for pursuing this story. Soon after 9/11, CNN discovered hundreds of tapes from Afghanistan which terrorism experts told us was the private collection of Osama bin Laden. CNN asked me to come to Atlanta to screen the tapes, look for any familiar faces from my part of the world. I went through 270 odd tapes in about 4 days. Around 2am on the second day, I played a tape of news pieces Al-Qaeda was interested in: I saw events in Chechnya, the bombing of the USS Cole in Yemen. Then I heard my voice. Osama bin Laden or one of his associates had taped my reports from the Philippines in 1995. I realized - they watch the news to see what authorities knew about their plots. Another tape we discovered from that stash showed me another tactic: a propaganda video that was used to incite jihadists to violence. All in Arabic, it showed video of Muslims being beheaded, being attacked in Indonesia, and pushed the viewer to join the jihad. It was extremely emotional, very manipulative and well-produced – with music scoring, Arabic chanting. Except I recognized the events because I had been there. It was in West Kalimantan, Indonesia – in ethnic violence between the Dayaks and the Madurese. The Dayaks were the old headhunters of Borneo. Now they had to deal with economic jealousies: their land invaded by Madurese transmigrants brought to Kalimantan under Suharto's land reform program. In one weekend, I saw about 8 people beheaded. It isn't what you'd expect. I remember walking onto a field watching boys play soccer. It seemed like a party. Everyone was having fun – cheering and jeering as they passed the ball around. Except when I got closer, I realized the ball they were using was the severed head of an old man. These events I had lived through were used in the Al-Qaeda videotapes – described as "atrocities committed by the infidels." Those tapes showed me how Al-Qaeda worked: it twisted the truth. Al-Qaeda is incredibly sophisticated and manipulative, extremely personal in approach. And in all their claims, there is always a seed of unavenged truth. Like in this one – the Dayaks were Christians, the Madurese Muslims. Tracing Al-Qaeda's links became an obsession. My discovery of their network in Southeast Asia changed me as a journalist. It was like building links in a chain: each link led to the next, and forging the chain meant revisiting many of the stories I had reported over the past decade: particularly those that struck me as instances of irrationality and senseless violence. For the first time, I began to see WHY events had happened the way they did. And that changed my picture of the world. Al-Qaeda came to Southeast Asia in 1988. Osama bin Laden's brother-in-law,

Mohammed Jamal Khalifa, came to the Philippines and began setting up charities and NGO's, a financial network that still exists today. Once the way of getting money to the terrorists was established, bin Laden sent several cells of expert terrorists ... including Ramzi Yousef and Khalid Shaikh Mohammed. When that cell was busted in 1995, Al-Qaeda switched its tactics, instead recruiting home-grown groups, local boys who blended in better, pushing the organization deeper underground. Al-Qaeda honed the strategy it used everywhere around the world: coopting homegrown organizations which had their own domestic agenda, but hijacking them into a global jihad. The goal is simple: much like the communists did before them, they want global domination, power, using religion as a tool. If you look at it bottom up, the groups wanted to topple their own government, get control of their land, set up sharia Islamic law, then Al-Qaeda can stitch all these cells together and create one giant Islamic Caliphate around the world. How can these Al-Qaeda associate groups topple governments? By knowing the fault lines in their societies: the goal is to create chaos, then as the more organized group, exploit the situation and take control. That continues until today – in Ambon and Sulawesi in Indonesia, in the southern Philippines, perhaps in southern Thailand. So where are we today? Still, some of the facts are unclear. Still, we have debate about what reality is. Is Jemaah Islamiyah really Al-Qaeda's arm in Southeast Asia? My answer to you is simple: it's like asking whether I'm American or Filipino – CNN or ABS-CBN. We want clear definitions when reality is not so clear, but actions are. JI and Al-Qaeda have different leadership groups, some common members ... all that is academic. What's important is that they share the same ideology and when Al-Qaeda needs something done in Southeast Asia, they turn to JI. Since the war on terror began here, more than 300 JI members have been arrested. Yet, the group continues to replenish its bench because we are losing the war of ideas. Denial – from governments, from analysts - still continues – each country still looking out for its own interests, still little acknowledgement that what goes on in one affects us all. Indonesia remains the theater of operations, basically since the Bali bombings, there's been one attack in about a year – the JW Marriott bombing and Australian embassy bombing. In the past, there was training going on in Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines. Now it seems the main training ground and refuge of key JI leaders is the southern Philippines. I'm sure each of our country presentations will give you more details, but let me leave you with some ideas to think about.

1) Remember that JI was formed in 1992, 1993. Yet it did not carry out its first attack until 2000 – 5 near simultaneous bombings in the Philippines followed 6 days later by 38 church bombs in Indonesia. Given developments in the region – national elections which have taken focus away from the war on terror, I believe we have entered another period of underground building for JI. Just because no attack is happening doesn't mean nothing is going on.

2) There is growing radicalization of home grown groups, with JI actively pushing its agenda of sectarian violence. In Indonesia, we're again seeing recurring scenes of violence in Sulawesi and Ambon. In the Philippines, we know that JI members were instructed to more heavily coopt members of the Abu Sayyaf. This was revealed in court documents released in Indonesia. That means a new trend: the Abu Sayyaf and JI carrying out bombing attacks, like the Superferry bombing last year and the Feb 14 attacks – they were carried out by Abu Sayyaf members trained in the southern Philippines by JI.

3) Yesterday's prison uprising showed how what authorities are doing are helping JI's agenda. In effect, the ASG members killed yesterday were the ones who led ASG when it was largely known as a kidnap-for-ransom gang. With them arrested and now killed, new leaders took over – more fundamentalist and more open to working with JI.

What I know from interviews with JI members in Indonesia and after reading through hundreds of interrogation reports of terrorists across the region, JI and its associate groups are in it for the long haul. It is not a matter of saying if there will be a next attack, it is determining when and stopping it before they can carry it out.