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Massive manhunt

Thousands of officers fan out after dangerous JI terrorist leader flees detention centre

By CARL SKADIAN
News Editor

REPORTED BY CHONG CHEE KIN, CAROLYN QUEK, DAVID BOEY & TEH JOO LIN

A MASSIVE manhunt involving thousands of policemen and Gurkhas was launched yesterday after Mas Selamat Kastari, the terrorist who planned to crash a hijacked plane into Changi Airport, escaped from detention.

Mas Selamat, 47, who took over as head of the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) terror network here in 1999, fled the Internal Security Department's Whitley Road Detention Centre at 4.05pm yesterday.

The hunt began soon after, with police, Gurkha and Special Operations Command officers fanning out several kilometres from Goldhill Avenue, near Barker Road, to the Beauty World shopping centre in Upper Bukit Timah Road.

They formed a perimeter at Malcolm Park, near the Singapore Chinese Girls' School (SCGS), facing the wooded area.

Late last night, officers with flashlights were seen going house to house along Malcolm Road, near St Joseph's Institution and behind Catholic Junior College, questioning residents and checking the leafy neighbourhood.

Elsewhere, officers stopped vehicles at roadblocks, questioned residents, and showed pictures of Mas Selamat.

The alert also went out to all border checkpoints, the Police Coast Guard, and even taxi companies, which broadcast a message to cabbies telling them to look out for the suspect.

Scores of plainclothes police officers also swarmed convenience stores and petrol stations, going through CCTV footage for any glimpse of the wanted man.

An SCGS teacher said school staff were also questioned.

The lockdown, from late afternoon through the night, gave the whole area an almost surreal feel,

with scores of police vehicles flashing blue and white lights lined up along the roads.

There were roadblocks at several areas, and grim-faced personnel, their neon green work vests glowing in the glare of lights, checked car boots and spoke urgently into walkie-talkies.

The huge uniformed presence signalled immediately to residents of the affected areas that something big was going on.

Mrs Jasmine Lim, 42, whose car was checked as she entered Goldhill Estate where she lives, said some residents were worried.

The mother of four said she called her two older children, aged 22 and 19, and told them to get home early. "I have a security alarm that I normally don't activate so early, but tonight I will," she said.

Senior accounts manager Terry Chia, 44, said police stopped him on his way home and showed him a picture of Mas Selamat.

He did not think anything of it at the time, but said he began to worry when he learnt that the escapee was a JI detainee.

The Ministry of Home Affairs issued a brief statement yesterday about the escape. It said Mas Selamat walks with a limp, and was not believed to be armed.

The Indonesian-born JI leader escaped a dragnet that resulted in the detention of 13 JI members here in December 2001. The group had been planning to attack targets here.

While in hiding, Mas Selamat plotted to hijack a plane and crash it into Changi Airport. The plot was foiled.

He was arrested in Indonesia twice, before being handed over to Singapore in February 2006, and has been detained under the Internal Security Act since March that year.

As The Straits Times went to press at 1.30am today, there was still an overwhelming police presence in the Bukit Timah area.

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MORE REPORTS, HOME H8-H9

JI leader Mas Selamat Kastari was Singapore's most wanted man, and was behind a plot to crash a hijacked plane into Changi Airport.

- He escaped at 4.05pm yesterday.
- He is not known to be armed.
- If you know where he is, call 999.

ON THE RUN

The large number of police vehicles - including these lined up along Dunearn Road - alerted residents that a big operation was taking place.

Armed Special Operations Command officers patrolling the streets in the Goldhill Avenue residential area yesterday evening.

ST PHOTOS: DESMOND WEE

» UPFRONT

Telecom deal scandal: Can Arroyo fend off foes?



By ALASTAIR MCINDOE
Philippines Correspondent
IN MANILA

A DEEPENING corruption scandal in the Philippines has started a political brush fire for President Gloria Arroyo, which her administration is frantically trying to put out.

Public anger is rising over whistle-blowing allegations in a Senate corruption inquiry of bribery on a staggering scale, involving a government contract with a Chinese firm.

President Arroyo is facing a barrage of calls from opposition politicians and activist groups who want her to resign; some are trying to rally support for another of this country's famous "people power" revolts.

The gathering storm is shaping up to be her worst crisis since the fallout over allegations that she cheated in the 2004 presidential election.

A heated controversy has been raging for several months over a now-cancelled contract worth \$460 million with ZTE Corp, one of China's largest telecoms firms.

The Senate's probe seemed to have run out of new leads until the testimony earlier this month of a meek-looking bureaucrat named Rodolfo Lozada.

He claimed the deal was overpriced by \$180 million to accommodate bribes for senior officials to ensure ZTE got the deal. Mr Lozada had worked on the project to set up a national broadband network for government offices.

The testimony of Mr Lozada, now lionised by the opposition, appears to corroborate some of the bribery allegations made by earlier witnesses in the hearings.

The President's husband - no stranger to controversy - has been implicated; and comments by Mrs

CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

Voting made easier for S'poreans abroad

By LI XUEYING & LYNN LEE

MORE overseas Singaporeans will be able to vote in future elections, following a relaxation of eligibility criteria.

Deputy Prime Minister Wong Kan Seng announced a slew of changes that make it easier for those abroad to cast their ballots.

The biggest change is in the residency requirement. Previously, a person must have resided in Singapore for a total of two years during the five years before an election.

That has been cut to just 30 days in the three years before an election, Mr Wong told Parliament.

Seven overseas Singaporeans interviewed cheered the changes, saying the new rules recognise the loyalty and contributions of those who are away from home.

Financial controller Tay Hwee Pio, 39, who has been working in Shanghai for the past six years, said: "This is good news for people like us. It recognises that though we're outside Singapore, we're still very much part of the country."

"It also gives us a say in electing the next leadership. That's important because at the end of the day, I'll return to Singapore."

There are about 150,000 Singaporeans working or studying over-

seas. The top four countries are Britain, Australia, China including Hong Kong, and the United States.

The Elections Department does not know how many more will be able to vote following the changes.

But they would be more than the 1,017 who registered to do so in the 2006 General Election - the first that allowed for overseas voting. Of that number, 553 were from contested constituencies, and only 335 eventually voted.

Parliament began examining the budget for the Prime Minister's Office yesterday, and Mr Wong spoke after MP Lee Bee Wah (Ang Mo Kio GRC) noted that with globalisation, more Singaporeans were over-

seas and "would be happy to be given the vote".

Agreeing, Mr Wong said the relaxed rules would let more overseas Singaporeans qualify to vote "while maintaining the spirit of the law that only those who continue to keep their links back home should be entitled to do so".

Government officials, those hired by approved international organisations, and their family members who previously enjoyed special dispensation from residency requirements will no longer do so.

Another rule change: Singaporeans whose names are in the register of electors in another country will no longer be disqualified from vot-

ing here. This is because some countries, such as Britain, include foreign residents on their electoral registers, said Mr Wong.

Overseas voters will also find it easier to register to vote.

Previously, their applications had to be sent in by hand or registered mail, within 21 days.

Now, they can register online using their SingPass. The deadline will also be extended, so long as their application is received before the Writ of Election is issued.

A ninth overseas polling station will be set up in New York. The others are in Canberra, Beijing, Shanghai, Hong Kong, Tokyo, London, Washington DC and San Francisco.

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