

Terror arrests

'Widen anti-terror efforts to include foreigners'

It does not mean being suspicious but to show concern and not let them be isolated, say leaders

Rachel Au-Yong

Efforts to counter extremism and radicalisation should be broadened to include foreigners, said community, political and religious leaders yesterday.

But this requires the involvement of all Singaporeans – Muslims and non-Muslims – and may also involve difficult discussions, they told The Straits Times.

Their comments follow the revelation yesterday that 27 Bangladeshi construction workers who were considering militant attacks abroad had been arrested here.

"The arrests clearly show that countering extremism in Singapore has to move beyond our main target audience, and also include foreigners," said Ustaz Mohamed Ali, vice-chairman of the Religious Rehabilitation Group, which counsels terror detainees and counters radicalism.

"It's important for us to engage the foreign workers at mosques. We must not let them be isolated and dissociated from the community here."

At the Khadijah Mosque in Geylang which has about 2,000 Bangladeshi worshippers, for example, regular meetings are held between mosque leaders and some of these worshippers to keep abreast of teachings, as well as to see how they can help with maintaining the mosque.

Singapore Mufti Mohamed Fatris Bakaram, speaking to reporters after a forum on inter-faith relations, said there were challenges to monitoring foreigners in religious settings. Those arrested met at mosques regularly. But given the casual nature "of friends coming together in between prayers and asking each other about life and work... almost every occasion seems innocent", said Dr Fatris.

"But I think it's time now to be... more vigilant," he added.

Being vigilant, however, did not mean being suspicious of foreigners, he said. Rather, it involved showing concern for them and their interests, and how they felt about their work and families.

"That touch of mercy, compassion and love is what is needed. And that's not only the responsibility of the Muslim community but everyone in Singapore," he added.

Employers in the construction industry, where there are many Bangladeshi workers, could remind them not to lose sight of their goal of earning money for their families back home, said Mr Rajan Krishnan, chief executive of a civil



Some Bangladeshi workers breaking fast at Khadijah Mosque. It is vital Singaporeans do not tar Bangladeshis with the same brush and regard them as terrorists, says Parliamentary Secretary for Home Affairs Amrin Amin. BERITA HARIAN FILE PHOTO

engineering firm and a member of the National Steering Committee on Racial and Religious Harmony.

"The assurance has to be two ways. Employers have to show that we respect our foreign workers and that we need them for our work sites and country. Workers' focus should be on their work, not extremist ideology," he added.

Jurong GRC MP Rahayu Mahzam, a member of the Government Parliamentary Committee for Home Affairs and Law, said Singapore had a robust security network, but this could be boosted by Singaporeans keeping an eye out for radicalised individuals in their midst.

That required Singaporeans, especially younger ones, to be more aware of the need to maintain religious harmony, she said.

"The situation has changed and the threat has evolved. So we need to have these conversations about religious harmony, and to be mature and not so easily offended. Otherwise, we'll succumb to the fear that terrorism aims to instil."

She also said her grassroots network has links with foreign worker dormitories in the area and she would tap these to see how to engage these workers better.

"But we must make sure we do not end up discriminating against

workers. At the end of the day, most rational Singaporeans know this was the work of a few extreme individuals," she said.

In a Facebook post, Parliamentary Secretary for Home Affairs Amrin Amin said it was important Singaporeans do not tar Bangladeshis or Muslims with the same brush and regard them as terrorists.

"I have met many Bangladeshis in Singapore and they are good people. I am Muslim and I reject these extremist teachings. The extremists preach division and hatred. We are better than that."

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Bangladeshi workers still needed here: Employers

Toh Yong Chuan
Manpower Correspondent

While shocked by the news that 27 Bangladeshi construction workers who turned radical had been arrested here, employers said they would continue to hire workers from that country.

Some said they would do so because their options were limited, while others felt that the actions of a handful should not taint the whole group.

The Singapore Contractors Association, which represents construction firms, declined to comment on the impact of the arrests on the sector, saying the case is sensitive and the association did not have sufficient information.

But Ms Annie Gan, managing director of Jian Huang Construction, said workers from India and Bangladesh will continue to be needed in the sector because they do the hard labour that other workers shun.

"It cannot be that we stop hiring them because of just one case," she said. "What is important is that companies continue to look after the welfare of their workers so that they feel (that they are) a part of the company and Singapore."

Besides the construction sector, cleaning companies also hire Bang-



Dormitory operators agree that if the foreign workers staying in their quarters are well integrated, it could prevent them from getting radicalised. ST FILE PHOTO

ladeshi workers to clear the rubbish bins in Housing Board estates.

"It is the only source of foreign workers approved for town council work, so we will continue to hire them unless there are other new approved sources," said Mr Milton Ng, managing director of Ramky Cleantech Services.

Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Industry president Thomas Chua said the episode showed that it is critical to assimilate these workers properly into the labour force, "regardless of the country of their origin".

Bangladesh High Commissioner Mahub Uz Zaman said there were

around 160,000 Bangladeshi workers in Singapore.

The spotlight also fell on how they lived here and interacted with one another. Dormitory operators agreed that if the workers staying in their quarters were well integrated, it could prevent them from getting radicalised.

Mr Mohamed Abdul Jaleel, the founder and chief executive of dormitory operator Mini Environment Service, said how dormitories are run can influence the behaviour of the workers who stay there.

"It is inevitable that those of the same nationalities will prefer to live together, but we make sure that they share common spaces

like sports and recreation facilities," he said.

About 8,000, or one-third, of the 23,500 foreign workers who stay in the three dormitories that he runs are from Bangladesh.

"They get their own space for prayers, but they know that they are part of a larger community," he added.

He will be briefing his staff to monitor how the foreign workers react to the news of the arrests.

Mr Kelvin Teo, chief operating officer of Centurion Dormitories, said an operator's role in integrating the different nationalities of foreign workers extended beyond the dormitories.

"We have to bring them to the larger community," he said. "For example, we took a group of 100 workers to participate in The Straits Times Run last year."

Mr Yeo Guat Kwang, chairman of foreign worker advocacy group Migrant Workers' Centre, urged employers and the public not to let the arrests taint their impression of foreign workers.

"The vast majority of foreign workers are law-abiding and hard-working," said Mr Yeo. "Let us not tar them with the same brush."

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BEVIGILANT AGAINST RADICALISM

While they were not planning any terrorist attacks in Singapore, and it is only a minority who subscribe to extremist teachings, the incident demonstrates growing tendencies towards religious extremism in the region, which could possibly undermine Singapore's national security and racial and religious harmony. SFCCA fully supports the Singapore Government's actions to beef up national security. Singaporeans should also remain calm and be more vigilant against radical teachings and ideologies, (and) at the same time work hand in hand with the Government to safeguard our collective security.



THE SINGAPORE FEDERATION OF CHINESE CLAN ASSOCIATIONS (SFCCA), in a statement following news of the arrests.



DAILY REMINDERS OF TERROR THREAT

Yesterday, I made a speech about terrorism in the region. Today, MHA announced 27 Bangladeshis who have become radicalised and were planning attacks back home...

They were meeting at a mosque on a regular basis. I sometimes walk past this mosque.

They had materials on techniques of silent killing and videos on jihadist propaganda.

The videos showed young children training overseas with firearms.

While they were planning attacks outside Singapore, they could have easily changed their minds and attacked Singapore.

Our security agencies have done well in picking them up early. I had said yesterday that the threat of terrorism is real. We are getting daily reminders of that.



MR K. SHANMUGAM, Minister for Home Affairs and Law, in a Facebook post.



STOPPED IN TIME

I'm glad that the group consisting of 27 Bangladeshi workers have had their plans curbed before things happened. Because it takes only one criminal act by such a group to have a devastating impact on the social cohesion that we have built for many years.



MUFTI FATRIS BAKARAM, on the arrest of the workers.