

Lesson today is hatred as Bashir cultivates bombers' breeding ground

Paul Toohey | July 27, 2009 12:00AM

THE term "formative years" was made very real in Jakarta earlier this month. One of the suicide bombers at the J.W. Marriott and Ritz-Carlton hotels was only 16 or 17 years of age. Teenage suicide bombers have been common in Iraq and Afghanistan, but until now have not featured in attacks on Australia's doorstep.

Just as it makes sinister sense to explode bombs from within the walls of hotels, rather than from the outside, it also makes sense to infiltrate the minds of boys and send them to their deaths before they reach an age where they might ask deeper questions of themselves.

The boy, who was accompanied by a 20-year-old on the mission to bomb the Jakarta hotels, was almost certainly a high school student recruited from one of the 14,000 Indonesian Islamic schools known as pesantren.

Abu Bakar Bashir is the man who offers spiritual guidance to the most extremist network of pesantren. His headquarters are the al-Mukmin school in Solo, central Java, from where at least 15 students have graduated to committing acts of terror across region.

Bashir is an ultra-conservative Wahhabist who believes it is permissible to kill infidels. He wanders through Java preaching his anti-Western and anti-Indonesian government hatred. There are 2000 impressionable students at al-Mukmin who routinely receive his counsel, and many thousands more within his pesantren network.

Despite being jailed for inciting terrorism with treasonous statements, Bashir openly continues to endorse terror attacks on kafirs (infidels). Speaking from his school last week, he blamed the CIA and Australia for the July 17 attacks and then, in the same breath, said the two suicide bombers were right to kill kafirs if they had ever entertained thoughts against Islam.

Bashir also endorsed Noordin Mohammad Top, who is still wanted for organising the 2002 Bali bombings, the 2003 Marriott bombing and the 2004 Australian embassy attack.

Some argue whether Bashir still heads Jemaah Islamiah, or has started another group. The distinction matters not to the families of the victims of the latest bombings. Terror has re-emerged after a short hibernation and it is a perverse reflection of Indonesia's tolerant new democracy that Bashir is permitted to continue preaching violence.

Former foreign minister Alexander Downer introduced an AusAid program after the 2002 Bali bombings that aimed to instil moderation into pesantren through modernisation.

Downer says the thinking was that parents were sending their children to the schools, where two to three million students are enrolled at any time, not necessarily because they were religious extremists, but because the schools were so readily available. He says Australia funds religious schools domestically, including Islamic schools, and it might be a way to encourage tolerance.

"The problem with the schools is the curriculum is very narrow," Downer says. "They focus on religious education and not much else. People come out of those schools being great experts on the Koran, but they don't have knowledge of arithmetic, geography, language and physics. It's hard for them to get jobs and they get swept into this world of fundamentalist religion."

An expert on Indonesian extremism, Holland Taylor, does not quarrel with Australia funding the pesantren, but warns an education can be a dangerous thing. He is the chief executive of the Jakarta-based LibForAll Foundation, which he co-founded with former president, Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur), to discredit the ideology of religious hatred in Indonesia.

"Modernisation will not produce moderation," says Taylor. "As a matter of fact, it's very often Muslims with the most modern educations who have the capability of committing the violent acts. They use the education they have to radicalise their fellow members of society."

So it was with the engineer Azahari Husin, who studied for four years at the University of Adelaide and went on, under the direction of Top and with the blessing of Bashir, to make and oversee the delivery of the 2002 Bali bombs and the 2003 Marriott bomb, and more.

Taylor says there are three different kinds of pesantren in Indonesia. There is the pluralist, moderate kind which Gus Dur has worked hard to promote through the largest Muslim organisation in the world, Nahdlatul Ulama.

There are also 10,000 pesantren run by the Muhammadiyah, the world's second-largest Muslim organisation. "The Muhammadiyah are overwhelmingly infiltrated by extremists - not terrorists, but extremists - who anathematise Australia, America and the secular system of Indonesia," Taylor says. The Muhammadiyah is in the throes of bitter quarrels over its growing hardline membership and he says that Australia must monitor the pesantren closely so the aid it gives does not blow up in its face.

"Then," says Taylor, "you have a network of pesantren controlled by Bashir and his network of disciples. They are independent, and it is his pesantren that is putting out the terrorists. No money that Australia would give to this network would in any way beneficially impact. You could not possibly moderate them by modernising them."

Australia has never provided aid, whether direct or indirect, to the al-Mukmin school. The aid program, carried on from Downer's time, is focused on building 2000 junior secondary schools, 46 of which are completed and operational.

The federal government said yesterday that it had "robust safeguards" to ensure Australian aid money did "not support institutions with radical views of Islam, or support individuals or

entities associated with terrorism" and would only support Islamic schools that taught Indonesian, English, maths, science and social sciences as required by the national, secular curriculum.

Bashir's al-Mukmin school teaches predominantly in Arabic, but it does teach some English, maths and other subjects. Some say this is because the modern terrorist needs modern skills.

While Bashir did prison time for inciting terrorism, Taylor doubts Bashir's vicious spray following the latest bombings would see him being prosecuted once again.

"Indonesia is somewhat erratic in its laws of enforcement," he says. "If they were really intent of getting Abu Bakar Bashir, they could probably get him on something, but Indonesia now has one of the most free-speech environments in Asia. What is really perverse is that the government is not identifying and cracking down on ideology."

Taylor says discussions about the various factions of JI, and supposed splits between Top and Bashir, are just a distraction. "Noordin Top has been involved with every bombing going back 10 years. I am totally convinced Abu Bakar Bashir was involved in the Bali bombing and gave it his blessing and approval.

"He is guilty of those murders just as much as (the actual killers) Amrozi and Mukhlas Sumudra. He got off (murder charges) because of the influence of Islamists in Indonesian society and in the government.

"He is inciting the murder now. He said (last) week that if anyone makes Islam their enemy, even in thought, it's the duty of all Muslims to kill them. That's incitement to murder."