

# Revelations on teen met with shock and dismay

Religious leaders call on community groups to join hands to engage youth

Published on May 28, 2015 1:47 AM



Suspected ISIS militants being detained at Hutan Lipur Gunung Nuang in Malaysia last month. Singapore Muslim leaders say community groups could get together to do more to engage young people, educate them about the danger of ISIS, and take the battle against the militant group online. -- PHOTO: THE STAR/ASIA NEWS NETWORK

By Lim Yan Liang

THE latest revelations that a 19-year-old student was not only actively making plans to go to Syria to join the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), but was also thinking about carrying out violent acts on this island if he could not go, were greeted with shock and dismay by both Muslim and non-Muslim leaders yesterday.

What was even more worrying, they noted, was that M. ArifilAzim Putra Norja'i had tried to recruit several others to join him, and none had alerted the authorities about it.

Several Muslim leaders interviewed yesterday said community groups could get together to do more to engage young people, educate them about the danger of ISIS, and take the battle against the militant group online.

"Organisations here need to band together and make youth development their main agenda: What kind of values we teach, what kind of information we should be providing, and what kind of people we want our youngsters to be in the future," said Association of Muslim Professionals chairman Azmoon Ahmad.

While some groups have over the years adapted lessons from abroad on engaging young people, what is lacking is a national approach to youth outreach, said Mr Azmoon, who also chairs the Inter-Agency

Aftercare Group (ACG). The ACG looks after the welfare of terror detainees' families and helps reintegrate the men into society upon their release.

Ustaz Ali Mohamed, co-chairman of the Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG), said organisations like the RRG and the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (Muis) had to redouble their community outreach to prevent further cases of self-radicalisation.

Noting that individuals who succumb to radical teachings online tend to have "a very shaky understanding of the religion", he said the community is looking at ways to amplify the correct interpretation of Islam online.

Mr Azmoon said: "We should make it as easy to access accurate information about Islam on the Internet as it is to find ISIS-related material."

Even as such moves are welcomed, ACG founding member Abdul Halim Kader felt the process of countering the misuse of religious concepts online has to start offline, at home and in class.

"We could look at reintroducing some form of religious education for secondary school students so they are clear about what is okay and what is not," said Mr Abdul Halim, who is also president of community group Taman Bacaan.

He also suggested that Muis could hand out leaflets on the danger of radical ideology to Muslim households and set up a hotline for parents worried about the online habits of their young to call.

One thing leaders said they were grateful for in Singapore was that those outside the Muslim community understood the challenges they faced and that radical teachings are not part of Islam but a distortion of the faith.

Christian and Buddhist religious leaders told The Straits Times that they stood in support of their Muslim counterparts.

"We have openly come out and said before that these radicals do not represent what Islam is about, and we know this, having built bridges with the Muslim community," said Reverend Kang Ho Soon, a pastor at Trinity Methodist Church and member of the Inter-Religious Organisation.

All Singaporeans have a responsibility to inform the authorities if anyone tries to radicalise them, no matter the religion being exploited, said Venerable SeckKwangPhing, president of the Singapore Buddhist Federation.

"A terrorist act has nothing to do with religion. Such acts go against the teachings of all religions."

yanliang@sph.com.sg