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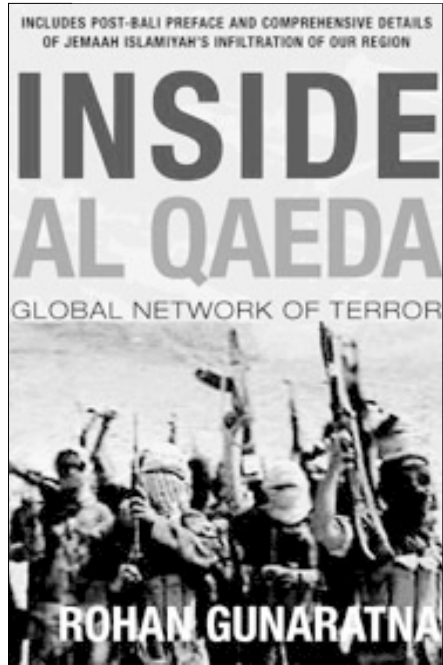
A Sydney journalist, he has worked with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's investigative television programme, Four Corners, since 1998.

The legitimising of terror fears: Research or Psy Ops?

Inside Al Qaeda: Global Network of Terror, by Rohan Gunaratna. Melbourne: Scribe Publications, 2002. 304 pp. ISBN 0 908011 95 4

IT HAS become the orthodoxy for journalists when talking about the rise of terrorism in Indonesia to refer to the presence of Jemaah Islamiyah. In the eyes of many observers terrorism barely existed in Indonesia prior to the Bali blasts.

The dozens of lethal blasts in Indonesia prior to the huge explosions in Bali on 12 October 2002 rated little in-depth reporting in the West's mainstream media. There were bombings in Sulawesi, in Maluku, in Sumatra, and in Jakarta too — hitting the Jakarta Stock Exchange and targets like



the office of the nation's Attorney-General. Dozens of churches were bombed over Christmas in 2000. The dead were victims of a ruthless campaign of terrorist bombings, hitting both political and symbolic targets. But the dead were non-whites, and so rated low on Western news agendas and on the radar of many observers.

Then Bali.

The deaths of 200 mainly Western tourists was different — now terrorism had hit Indonesia!

But the greatest source of terror in Indonesia over its short history as an independent nation has been its own military and security forces. The new

phalanx of ‘terrorologists’ rarely spoke of this however. The thousands of victims of military terror in Indonesia were described officially as Security Disturbing Gangs. And, as Indonesia was a friend of the West, the West’s mainstream observers and media largely accepted and repeated this ‘official’ version of events.

In Indonesia though, this real story has been known for a long time — both by individual Indonesians whose lives had been devastated by terror acts of their own military, and by pro-democracy organisations, NGOs, and community groups. Groups like YPKP (Indonesian Institute for the Study of the 1965-66 Massacre) have been dedicated to unearthing the truth of the terrible origins of the Suharto years. Hounded by secretive forces, they operate largely underground again.

The deaths of thousands of civilians in Indonesia occurred from the birth of the Suharto dictatorship right up to his fall. Remember the hundreds killed in the anti-Chinese riots in 1997 and 1998; and since the fall of the dictator Suharto, the further thousands who have died in places like Kalimantan, East Timor, West Papua, Maluku, Aceh — many the victims of state terrorism. These deaths barely rate in the minds of ‘the international community’.

And they barely figure in the writings of the acclaimed terrorologist, Dr

Rohan Gunaratna. Gunaratna has written the widely accepted *Inside Al-Qaeda: Global Network of Terror*, published first in 2002 following the attacks on New York and Washington, and since reprinted with a Preface written post the Bali bombing. We’ll return to Indonesia later.

Formative years

A Sri Lankan, Gunaratna cut his teeth working for the Sri Lankan government from 1984 to 1994 researching and writing about the bloody Tamil separatist conflict. Much of what he now writes he sees through the prism of that conflict.

About the Tamils, Gunaratna has written, ‘What is required is not grand plans but immediate measures to alleviate the suffering of the people of the north-east,’ as a way of undermining support for separatism. At the same time he has encouraged (1998) better counter-insurgency training for the Sri Lankan military and ‘a more coherent national psy ops programme’ aimed at civilians to build political support for the anti-rebel campaign.

He has also made some pointers directed at the media in Sri Lanka: ‘They have to move beyond reporting to analysis and advocacy. Although, media is not expected to take a rigid position and only report events as they occur, the media in a developing country has a more responsible role to play.

The Sri Lankan media barons must reflect on this need'. He argues that the Sri Lankan media should educate the public about the dangers of terrorism and the role of negotiations. 'The media, at the turn of the twentieth century, has a role to guide leaders and lobby the public'.

Gunaratna thanks the subsequent two years that he spent in the US, where he worked with South Asia specialist Stephen Cohen, and Stansfield Turner, a former CIA chief, for focusing his attention on international aspects of terrorism.

He was also assisted in his international terrorism writings by a massive data-base of information on terrorism to which he had access during his time in Scotland at the University of St Andrews' Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence.

Gunaratna's CV contains an impressive list of governments, corporations and institutions with which he has worked and studied. Recently a controversy has arisen following the publishing of a critique of Gunaratna in *The Age* (20 July 2003; News, p. 13) which suggested some massaging of the CV. Gunaratna has never held the position of 'principal investigator' with the UN's Terrorism Prevention Branch as he claims — though he was a consultant there. And he has never addressed the Australian Parliament, nor the US Congress, nor the United Na-

tions, as his CV claims — though he has addressed committees of those bodies.

Inside the book

Gunaratna's book is on the surface a very impressive collection of much of the data about Al Qaeda. It contains a description of the origins and goals of Al Qaeda, a profile of its main members, a country-by-country description of the 'global network' said to have been developed by Al Qaeda, and a review of the prospects of the international responses to it.

Praise for the book has been effusive from some sources: 'The most comprehensive study ever done on Al Qaeda.' — CBSNews; 'An alarming, but important book on Al Qaeda.' — CNN; 'Excellent.' — *Washington Post*. *The Times* (of London) stated: 'No one reading Gunaratna's book could be in any doubt that Al Qaeda is an awesome force.'

Except perhaps the publisher, that is. So wary is Gunaratna's own publisher about the often flimsily corroborated statements in the book, that he warns ominously that references to organisations as having had contact with Al Qaeda 'should be treated as nothing more than a suggestion' that they 'were the unwitting tools' of terrorists.

The media, hungry for help in analysing Al Qaeda, has leapt upon

Gunaratna's origins with zeal, magically providing him with some kind of 'objectivity', without critically examining or verifying the sources for his information. Gunaratna has developed his book with the considerable help of a number of intelligence agencies who have given him access to alleged terrorists in custody, transcripts of intercepts, interrogation notes, as well as briefings by their intelligence agents. Gunaratna does not ponder on the intent of those whose views he repeats.

London's *Sunday Times* says Gunaratna is 'one of the few qualified to talk with authority about Al-Qaeda'. The strength of his book, says the *Sunday Times*, is that he 'has interviewed more than 200 terrorists, including Al-Qaeda members, in dozens of countries, and read countless transcripts of intercepted communications, including calls made by Bin Laden himself'.

Of greatest strategic concern to Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific region is the development of Al Qaeda in Indonesia, the largest Muslim nation on earth. Unfortunately Gunaratna devotes just five pages specifically to this country in his 300 page book — surprising even taking into account it was written prior to the Bali bombing.

In the section on Indonesia, Gunaratna sets about building his case against Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) as the

Al Qaeda protege in Indonesia. He does this through citing a number of links between Al Qaeda associates and Jemaah Islamiyah and hence to violence in Indonesia. Gunaratna refers to the 'Indonesian Mujahidin Council', a group set up by accused JI leader Abu Bakar Bashiyar, as being involved in conflict in Maluku and Sulawesi (p 198). Gunaratna quotes from an Indonesian intelligence document to link the group's members to the violence that has claimed thousands of lives over the past five years.

Those links may exist but to use filtered information prepared by a questionable source without presenting any further corroboration or qualifying information on the actions of the source of the document is regrettable. His trust in Indonesian intelligence officers and an intelligence report prepared by the very security forces who have been themselves implicated in incitement and even direct involvement in the violent conflicts in the eastern islands is nothing short of astounding.

Later, Gunaratna makes a bold assertion when he states:

Of the many operations conducted by Al Qaeda in Indonesia, the millenium bombings on Christmas Eve 2000 are very instructive of their tactics (p.199).

Unfortunately he cites no source for

this allegation, and makes no qualification about others who may have been involved in the coordinated blasts across 30 cities in Indonesia which killed 19 people and injured dozens.

Far more considered on this point is the work of Sidney Jones of the International Crisis Group (ICJ), who has written more detailed and balanced accounts of the rise of Jemaah Islamiyah in Indonesia. Jones has written a report entitled *Indonesia's Terrorist Network* (2002), in which she questions whether members of the Armed Forces may have had prior knowledge of the church bombings of 2000, at least in the city of Medan. Jones is not directly accusing the military of the bombings but argues that 'a curious link' between Acehese figures close to Jemaah Islamiyah and Indonesian military intelligence should be investigated.

Indeed there are many 'curious links' between the Indonesian military and intelligence services, and radical Muslim groups such as Laskar Jihad which have been involved in politically-motivated terrorism, that should be investigated another time.

The footnotes to Gunaratna's section on Indonesia are revealing — 10 of the 25 footnotes state the source as Indonesian intelligence officers or the intelligence report (another eight cite press articles) (p 261). His writing here on Indonesia reveals a remark-

ably narrow selection of sources, a profound lack of knowledge, and a flawed understanding, of the history of the Indonesian armed forces and of their intelligence operations.

The bombing at the Marriott Hotel in Jakarta is seen too readily as new evidence of Jemaah Islamiyah/Al Qaeda activity in Indonesia. After the August bombing of the hotel, Gunaratna went to press. 'This week's mass casualty bombing in Jakarta demonstrates that Jemaah Islamiah continues to pose a significant threat to South-East Asia and to Australia' (Too close to al-Qa'ida, *The Australian*, 8 August, 2003).

Gunaratna relies on the media's forgetfulness. It is worth remembering though, that the previous largest bombing in Jakarta was in September 2000 when a huge car-bomb blast in the underground car park of the Jakarta Stock Exchange killed 17 people and injured 20. It would have been even more devastating if the bomb had managed to bring down the multi-storey building. This terror bombing was solved — two of the bombers were captured and tried, another escaped. After their trial they were found guilty and jailed for life. They were both members of Kopassus, the Indonesian army's special forces.

There are dangers in becoming too close to your sources. Gunaratna is rarely critical of intelligence services,

unless it is of the West's. 'Largely due to the tireless efforts of the intelligence community, especially of the Singaporean service, the region is aware of the existence of a resilient terrorist network' (2002). Now head of terrorism research at the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies in Singapore, Gunaratna has worked with the Singapore Government he praises in developing their strong anti-terrorism stance. He co-authored the Singapore Government's White Paper on terrorism, published in January 2003.

In a new preface to the post-Bali edition of *Inside Al Qaeda*, Gunaratna slams the Australian Government's anti-terrorism efforts, in part blaming Australia for the rise of militant Islam:

The Australian Government should have invested sufficient resources in its immediate neighbourhood to help dampen Islamism (p xxii).

And he makes extravagant claims about Australia without offering any evidence. '...JI's operational leader, Hambali, visited Australia a dozen times' (p xxiii). This statement, denied immediately by Australian intelligence authorities, may indicate that, if Gunaratna's source was a South-East Asian intelligence agency, its information may be dangerously flawed, and could have had lethal consequences on the innocent if acted upon.

Nonetheless Gunaratna says that Australian universities and the media have been infiltrated by Al Qaeda and he argues for a massive domestic security crackdown in Australia: 'ASIO and ASIS need to double their strength. They also need to acquire greater powers to operate effectively and efficiently' (p xxiv).

And he seeks military and intelligence support to countries in the region to crackdown on their citizens too: 'Australia could assist countries in South-East Asia, especially Indonesia, to improve their capability to fight terrorism' (p xxiv). This is of particular concern when Gunaratna has demonstrated he is so blind to State-sponsored terrorism in Indonesia.

Of greatest concern is Gunaratna's apparent support for the very techniques used by terrorists themselves being adopted by the West. He says the CIA's assassination by guided missile inside Yemen of suspected members of Al Qaeda exemplifies the approach needed. This assassination technique has been used spectacularly and often indiscriminately with civilian casualties resulting, in Israel, where Gunaratna holds the position of Honorary Fellow at Israel's International Policy Institute for Counter-Terrorism.

Finally Gunaratna's reveals his belief in discarding international law

in the pursuit of terrorists: 'As Al Qaeda is a learning organisation, the law-enforcement, security and intelligence agencies fighting it must be goal-oriented and not rule-oriented' (p. xxv).

Gunaratna's aggressive extra-legal approach stands in harsh contrast to what his former colleague from the Center for International and Security Studies in the US argues. 'Economic sanctions should be used against state sponsors of terrorism, even if they take a long time to be effective,' wrote former head of the CIA Stansfield Turner just one week after the terror attacks on New York and Washington.

Legal recourse is the option most compatible with American values. Legal recourse against terrorists falls into two categories: apprehending terrorists, and isolating states that support terrorism. Apprehending the terrorists themselves serves as a warning to would-be terrorists that they are likely to be caught. Bringing culprits to justice is an important step in curtailing terrorist acts (2001).

In the confusion and fear that followed September 11 and the Bali bombing, people looked to make some sense from what may have appeared a senseless act. In his best-selling book, *Inside Al-Qaeda*, Rohan Gunaratna of-

fers his simple solution — be alert and alarmed, a pretext welcomed by those who wish to exploit our fears.

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Note: The views expressed in this review are the writer's and do not represent the views of the ABC or the Four Corners programme.

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