

'Safe house' turns war zone in Indonesian hamlet

AFP, Beji

A tense overnight standoff between suspected Islamist militants and Indonesia's elite counter-terrorism forces ended Saturday in scenes worthy of a Hollywood action movie.

More than 17 hours after it began Friday afternoon, the siege reached its bloody climax when heavily armed police wearing ski masks stormed the remote farmhouse in Central Java.

Their target was one of Asia's most wanted men, Malaysian Islamist Noordin Mohammed Top, who is accused of launching the bloodiest suicide attacks in Indonesia since the 2002 Bali bombings.

But there would be no clean-cut ending to

the drama, as authorities refused to confirm media reports that Noordin had been killed in the storm of police gunfire and explosions that preceded their final assault.

If the reports are true, the raid marks the final act of the biggest manhunt in Indonesian history and will be a major blow to Islamist extremist networks seeking to unite half of Southeast Asia under an Islamic caliphate.

An AFP reporter at the scene described seeing at least three bodies after the raid, two in body bags and one exposed on the ground outside the ramshackle, single-storey abode on the edge of a typical Javanese rice paddy.

The final attack began when around 50 police took up positions around the

house under the cover of darkness.

As dawn broke, witnesses described a series of explosions punctuated by sporadic gunfire. Most of the blasts seemed minor, possibly stun or flash grenades, but one destroyed the roof and smoke billowed into the sky.

At this stage the police opened fire with their assault rifles, apparently indiscriminately and from various angles including a hill overlooking the property to the rear.

Meanwhile, about four officers with anti-blast shields crept up to the house from a position in front of the television cameras and laid explosive charges, before retreating and detonating them through cables.

Noordin eluded capture for yrs

AP, Jakarta

Noordin Mohammed Top, an aspiring regional commander for al-Qaeda who evaded capture for years until he was reportedly shot dead in a raid Saturday, has been linked to a series of bombings in Indonesia that killed 250 people.

The manhunt for Southeast Asia's most wanted militant escalated last month when twin suicide blasts killed seven at the Ritz-Carlton and JW Marriott hotels in the Indonesian capital, Jakarta, ending a four-year lull in terrorism.

Noordin has most notably been linked to the Bali bombings in 2002 and 2005, which together killed 222 people, the majority of them foreigners vacationing on the resort island. He emerged as a regional terrorist leader with extensive bomb-making skills after the first Bali bombing and is accused of masterminding at least three major strikes in Indonesia.

If confirmed, his death would mark a major setback for terrorists operating in the world's most populous Muslim-majority nation.

Counterterrorism operations in recent years netted hundreds of suspected militants, including a number of Noordin's closest associates. But Noordin's time on the run seems to have ended in an hours-long shootout at a remote village in central Java where he had been holed up.

Police have not confirmed that his body was recovered from the scene, where a siege culminated in a burst of gunfire and explosions and police flashed each other a thumbs up.

Noordin, 40, formed his radical ideas in the early 1990s at a Malaysian boarding school headed by an Indonesian Muslim cleric, Abdullah Sungkar, who founded regional terror network Jemaah Islamiyah, which Noordin joined in 1998 after brief training in the southern Philippines.

News in Brief

Sonia to visit Rae Bareilly on Aug 10

PTI, Lucknow

Congress President Sonia Gandhi will launch development projects in her Rae Bareilly Lok Sabha constituency and meet party workers on Monday.

During her three-day visit beginning August 10, the second since last month, she will also tour different parts of the constituency, party spokesman Akhilesh Pratap Singh said here yesterday. The UPA Chairperson will inaugurate the Rajiv Gandhi hostel building at Feroz Gandhi Engineering Institute.

Kashmir to construct mini secretariat

PTI, Srinagar

The Jammu and Kashmir government has planned to construct a mini secretariat at Sopore, about 35 km from here, in Baramulla district as offices located in the town are without government accommodation.

A project report for the purpose would be submitted to government shortly, Baramulla deputy commissioner Latief-u-Zaman Devia said here yesterday. The government has already identified the land for the project, he added.



PHOTO: AFP

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton (L) shakes hands with South African President Jacob Zuma during a meeting in Durban yesterday where they pledged to cement closer ties between the new administrations in Washington and Pretoria.

Hillary moves to boost ties with S Africa

AP, Durban

US Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton met with South African President Jacob Zuma yesterday in a bid to improve strained ties with the country.

The pair held talks in the port city of Durban, a day after Clinton praised a warming in ties between the United States and South Africa since the recent elections in both countries of new presidents.

President Barack Obama is eager to remake a relationship that had suffered during the Bush administration due to differences with former South African President Thabo Mbeki's government over the cause and treatment of AIDS and the crisis in Zimbabwe.



PHOTO: AFP

Indonesian anti-terror police commandos assault a farmhouse in Beji village in Central Java yesterday in an operation linked to investigations into twin suicide bombings on hotels in the capital Jakarta. Asian terror suspect Noordin Mohammed Top (Inset) was killed during the raid on his hideout by heavily armed counter-terrorism police in Indonesia, local television reported. The television station did not disclose its sources and police have not confirmed the report, which came as ambulances arrived at the suspected hideout following a 17-hour siege involving heavy gunfire and explosions.

Abbas re-elected Fatah chief at congress

AFP, Bethlehem

Fatah yesterday re-elected Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas as head of the secular movement on the fifth day of its first congress in 20 years, which has been marred by disputes on how to revive its authority.

But a vote to renew the governing bodies of the secular movement was delayed again and re-scheduled to take place on Sunday.

More than 2,000 delegates at the congress in the West Bank city of Bethlehem unanimously raised hands in favour of Abbas, who took over as party chief after the 2004 death of Yasser Arafat.

The convention, which started on Tuesday and had been due to last three days, was extended after bitter arguments between the old guard and young delegates seeking a stronger role and broad reform.

Saturday's discussions centred on ways to clean up the corruption-plagued party and offer an alternative to their bitter rivals in the Islamist Hamas movement.

Debate focused on how to restore Abbas's authority in Gaza after Hamas seized control of the enclave in June 2007, routing Fatah forces and limiting Abbas's power to the Israeli-occupied West Bank.

Fatah, which controls the Palestinian Authority, exercised undivided power among Palestinians before it lost heavily to Hamas in a 2006 parliamentary election.

In a new sign of the continued rivalry between the factions, Fatah accused Hamas on Friday of briefly detaining a number of its senior leaders in Gaza.

Infighting and corruption allegations have further weakened Fatah, which was founded by Arafat in the late 1950s.

UNSC extends Iraq mission for a year

AFP, United Nations

The Security Council voted unanimously on Friday to renew the mandate of the United Nations mission for Iraq for one year.

The 15-nation council extended for 12 months the mandate of the 1,104-strong UN mission (UNAMI), which expires Friday, and expressed its intention to review the agreement "in 12 months or sooner, if requested by the government of Iraq."

The resolution sponsored by Britain and the United States also called on the Iraqi government and other member states to continue to provide security and logistical support to the UN mission in Iraq.

Last month, Ad Melkert of the Netherlands, an associate administrator of the United Nations Development Programme, was appointed to succeed Staffan de Mistura as UNAMI chief.

De Mistura, a Swede, quit after less than two years in the post. He has been named deputy executive director of the World Food Programme.

The renewal of UNAMI's mandate came less than two weeks before the world body prepares to commemorate the August 19, 2003 truck bomb attack on the UN headquarters in Baghdad, which killed 22 people, including special envoy Sergio Vieira de Mello.



PHOTO: AFP

This image released by The Field Museum in Chicago, shows an Egyptian limestone statue, depicting an unidentified woman, carved during the New Kingdom Period, dating from between 1550 BC to 1050 BC.

Ancient Egyptian statue thrills Jackson fans

AFP, Chicago

Was Michael Jackson secretly trying to be "The Pharaoh of Pop?"

An ancient Egyptian bust on display at the Field Museum in Chicago has been the focus of interest since the star's death as visitors double-take at the eerie similarities between the 3,000-year-old statue and the singer.

The limestone statue -- which depicts an unidentified woman -- went on display at the museum in 1988 and was carved during the New Kingdom Period, dating from between 1550 BC to 1050 BC.

Like Jackson's surgically-altered face, the carving has a distinct, upturned nose and rounded eyes.

And like Jackson -- if rumours of the singer's prosthesis are to be believed -- the statue's nose has partially disintegrated.

Museum curator Jim Phillips said staff had been "inundated" with inquiries from Jackson fans since the star's similarities to the bust were pointed out in a recent newspaper article.

Britain in Afghanistan for 40 years

Says incoming army chief

AFP, London

Britain's involvement in Afghanistan could last for up to 40 years, the next head of the British Army said yesterday.

General David Richards, who will become Chief of the General Staff later this month, told The Times newspaper: "The Army's role will evolve, but the whole process might take as long as 30 to 40 years."

While British troops would only be required in the country in the medium term, there was "absolutely no chance" of Nato pulling out completely and Britain would have to play its role in nation-building, Richards said.

"I believe that the UK will be committed to Afghanistan in some manner -- development, governance, security sector reform -- for the next 30 to 40 years," he said.

The general said the focus of the Nato-led force should now be on the expansion of the Afghan army and police force.

"Just as in Iraq, it is our route out militarily, but the Afghan people and our opponents need to know that this does not mean our abandoning the region."

"We made this mistake once. Our opponents are banking on us doing it again, and we must prove them wrong," he said.

Britain has a 9,100-strong force in Afghanistan, which has suffered 26 deaths since the start of July as the battle against the Taliban intensifies ahead of presidential elections on August 20.

The latest casualties were three paratroopers killed on Friday after their vehicle was blown up by a roadside bomb north of Lashkar Gah, raising to 195 the number of British dead since operations began in 2001.

Lanka holds post-war polls in north

AP, Colombo

Sri Lanka hailed elections yesterday near an area once dominated by the Tamil Tiger rebels as the first seeds of democracy sprouting along the former battlefields of its recently ended civil war.

But opposition parties accused the ruling coalition of restricting their campaigns, the government barred most media from the region, and voters appeared apathetic to the first elections in the northern cities of Vavuniya and Jaffna since 1998.

The cities, where Tamils are a majority, are just outside the shadow state the Tamil Tigers ran as a virtual dictatorship and were frequently hit by violence during the quarter-century civil war.

The government recaptured the territory and routed the rebels on the battlefield in May, ending a conflict that killed between 80,000 and

100,000 people. The rebels were fighting for a separate state for minority Tamils after decades of marginalisation by governments dominated by the Sinhalese majority.

"This is another step toward strengthening democracy in the north," said Douglas Devananda, a government minister from Jaffna. Devananda's Tamil party with its armed paramilitary wing is leading the ruling coalition's election slate in Jaffna.

Polls opened Saturday at 7 am (0130 GMT) with 125,043 eligible voters set to elect 34 members to municipal councils in the two cities.

Six political parties and independent groups fielded 174 candidates for Jaffna, while 135 politicians from nine parties contested seats in Vavuniya. Results were expected Sunday.

Tigers in fear after leader's capture

AFP, Colombo

Senior Tiger cadres in military custody feared for their lives after the new head of the defeated guerrilla group was arrested in Malaysia, a pro-rebel website said yesterday.

The Tamilnet.com website said Wednesday's dramatic capture of Selyarasa Pathmanathan, better known as KP, in the Malaysian capital Kuala Lumpur raised "serious concerns about the world outlook to political justice."

Pathmanathan, who took over as head of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) after its military leadership was killed in the final stages of fighting in mid May, had chosen to reorganise the rebel group as a non-violent movement.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Mehsud killing a blow to Taliban

AFP, Washington

With a shattering stroke from the sky, the United States appeared to have dealt a major setback to extremist forces by killing the charismatic leader of the Pakistani Taliban.

Analysts said Baitullah Mehsud, widely believed to have been killed in a missile attack Wednesday while visiting his wife in a Pakistani tribal area, represented the top threat to Pakistan's stability.

"We've buried him more than once in the past. But assuming it is right, it is a pretty significant step. He became a symbol of the Taliban's war on the Pakistani state, much more than any other figure," said Bruce Riedel, a former CIA officer and White House adviser.

"In the pantheon of terrorist leaders, I really have to say



that (al-Qaeda leader Osama) bin Laden and Ayman Zawahiri are the only other two that are higher than him," said Bruce Hoffman, a terrorism expert at Georgetown University.

Pakistani officials said they believed Mehsum died in the

missile attack but were awaiting physical proof of his demise.

According to The New York Times, the missile strike from a CIA drone took place as Mehsum, a diabetic, was on a drip infusion for his kidney ailment.

Citing two unnamed Taliban fighters, the newspaper said the strike occurred when Mehsum was being tended to by one of his wives on the roof of a house that belonged to his father-in-law, Mulvi Ikramuddin, in the village of Zanghara, in South Waziristan.

Ikramuddin's brother, a medical practitioner, was treating him there, The Times said.

Top militants of his Tehreek-e-Taliban (TTP) umbrella group, meanwhile, were said to be gathering in

their stronghold in South Waziristan ahead of an "important" announcement.

Mehsum's elimination, which likely would have required close coordination between the Americans and Pakistanis, also indicated that the two often-mistrustful allies have cemented their security relationship, the analysts added.

Mehsum was at the top of the Pakistani government's most wanted list, having been implicated in the 2007 assassination of prime minister Benazir Bhutto, whose husband is now president of Pakistan.

He went on to lead a campaign of suicide bombings, assassinations and insurgent attacks that swept out of the border tribal areas into the Swat Valley, threatening Islamabad.



PHOTO: AFP

A South Ossetian woman and her daughter lay flowers by the portrait of their son and brother, killed one year ago, at the genocide memorial in Tskhinvali yesterday. Georgia and Russia traded fierce accusations as competing ceremonies were held to mark the first anniversary of their war that shook the Caucasus region and re-ignited Cold War-era tensions.