

The Risk Professional: attacks on Churches in Malaysia

The Malaysian government is appealing for calm after a series of attacks on Christian churches and other places of worship in recent days. But it is also putting its weight behind efforts to prevent further attacks.

Speaking to reporters yesterday, a government representative said that he was instructing the IDS to monitor SMS communication to identify those using this communications medium in connection with the attacks. In addition to planning and execution, he was also concerned that the situation may escalate as rumour and scaremongering was distributed.

It was also announced over the weekend that blogs would be monitored and if necessary action taken against those writing inflammatory material.

But there are some concerns that there is a lack of outrage in the government: some say, openly, that if there had been a single attack on a mosque, there would have been a widespread and instant response including heavy duty protection.

However, the government's measured response is probably the right one: the only attack so far witnessed was carried out by two men on a motorbike, throwing a molotov cocktail and then burning out the apparently stolen motorbike. The two, fully covered, were not identifiable.

Fire-bombing churches is not uncommon in the region: Mondano in southern Philippines and Sulawesi in Indonesian Borneo have suffered a campaign of such events for a number of years. In both areas, the attacks have over time spilled into violence and deadly force against Christians.

The Malaysian government is not sitting on its hands: the Civilian Defence Corps (RELA) has 70,000 members: they are being deployed to protect churches. However, no announcement has been made as to the stationing of formal government forces or police at such venues. Again, this is probably the right measured response: the appearance of armed - apparently trouble ready - uniformed officers is likely to be seen as inflammatory.

But there is another aspect: Malaysia, like its neighbour Singapore, has a large and highly effective undercover operation. Ordinary police forces, not just Special Branch, have many officers who do little other than watch and listen, integrating themselves within potentially troublesome groups. These, historically, have been at the forefront of Malaysia's efforts to maintain stability. In Malaysia, the plain clothes officer is as likely to be collecting intelligence than being a detective.

Therefore the apparent failure to put police on guard is not in fact such a failure: it is consistent with a policy that was developed to combat Communist terrorism in what Malaysians call "The Emergency."

Perhaps the only issue that is genuinely outstanding is the question of a definition. Malaysian politics is courtly, with everyone careful to say things in a gentle way. But it is only a matter of time until someone asks the blunt question: if an attack is made for political or ideological reasons, does that not turn a simple crime into a terrorist act? And if it does, why are the responses reserved for terrorism not being applied.

The answer to the second part of that question is that they already are, but without the over-reaction that characterises responses to terrorism elsewhere.

And, so far, no one has been injured or killed in the attacks, but that may be as much luck as judgement: and it may not last.

With many groups, including 130 Muslim charities and groups, saying that they will help provide support to churches, there will be more people at the churches more often. Some will drive by, some will walk around and - inevitably - some will decide to stay in the building.

It is the latter who will be at risk should an attack take place.

But as the number of attacks grew to seven, Home Minister Datuk Seri Hishammuddin Tun Hussein said "so far the attacks have involved stone throwing and arson attempts. There is no serious damage." That was interpreted by local media as "the situation is not serious." That is certainly not the government's view.

Hishammuddin says that current intelligence is that the attacks are not in any way co-ordinated. He went on "The situation is under control. We are monitoring the situation so that it will not become extreme." But it appears that one of his greatest concerns is the appearance of wild accusation on blogs that the Government and the ruling UMNO party are behind the attacks.

There is little doubt that the government is right: the stirring of racial tensions and ludicrous accusations on the blogs is at least as great a threat to the stability of the country as the attacks on churches.