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Risks and Rewards: Can a Million Dollars Help Capture MSK?

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Examples from around the world show that monetary rewards can help governments capture terrorists. However, such programmes are not without their challenges and complications.

SINGAPORE'S DECISION to offer a S\$1 million (US\$740,000) reward for information leading to the recapture of Mas Selamat Kastari may yield results, if examples from other parts of the world are any indication.

Perhaps the most well-known rewards scheme is the "Rewards for Justice" programme, which offers large sums in exchange for information leading to international terrorists and war criminals. Since the 9/11 attacks, over US\$77 million has been dispensed to more than 50 people. The most recent Rewards for Justice fugitive to be captured is Serbian war criminal Radovan Karadzic, believed responsible for the massacre of thousands during the Bosnian genocide. Karadzic had a US\$5 million bounty on his head under the Rewards for Justice programme and was apprehended on 21 July.

The Southeast Asian Context

The rewards programme does not always yield fruits, however. Multi-million dollar rewards for more than 30 terrorists remain unclaimed, including 25 million dollar sums for al-Qaeda leaders Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri. However, the probable reasons for the failure of these programmes with regards to al-Qaeda leaders do

Terrorists Captured and Rewards Paid:

Khadaffy Janjalani and Jainal Antel Sali Jr: Leaders of the terrorist organization Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG). Both killed. Reward: US\$10 million

Hambali: Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) military commander. Reward: US\$10 million

Ramzi Yousef: Mastermind of the 1993 World Trade Center bombing. Reward: US\$2 million

Hamsiraji Marusi Sali: Number 3 in ASG, involved in kidnapping of three Americans. Reward: US\$1 million

Khamis Sirhan al-Muhammad: Key figure in Iraqi insurgency. Reward: US\$1 million

Edgar Gustavo Navarro: Commander in the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Columbia (FARC). Reward: US\$600,000

Ahmad Santos: Bomb maker allied with ASG and JI. Reward: US\$500,000

Toting Hanno: Involved in ASG attack on Philippine hospital and kidnapping of three Americans. Reward: US\$20,000

not apply in the Southeast Asian context. Al-Qaeda's leaders are thought to be in the Afghan/Pakistani tribal areas – a unique environment with inherent challenges not found in Southeast Asia. There are illiteracy rates as high as 97 percent in parts of the tribal areas, rendering much advertising for the rewards ineffective. Officials suspect that people in these areas also may not believe they will actually be paid or may fear violent retaliation. Further, the tribal ethos and prevalence of radical Islam may also silence potential informants.

In Singapore and its Southeast Asian neighbours, the social context is remarkably different. It may be closer to that of the United States. When rewards are offered within the US for information leading to the capture of a fugitive, there are often positive results. For example, the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Ten Most Wanted programme has yielded tips leading to the arrests of more than 110 out of 467 fugitives it featured.

Challenges and Considerations

The decision to offer a large monetary reward is not without its complications, however. The first challenge is to run a convincing advertising campaign, so that potential informants believe that the government is sincere in its promise to pay out. This is especially important when the informant has a lot to lose by coming forward.

Anonymity and Amnesty

When a potential informant belongs to the community harbouring the fugitive, government guarantees of anonymity are important. In most of the instances where the US has paid rewards, the recipients have been kept anonymous. Media coverage last month of the rewards dispersal to two former Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) militants and two civilians who provided information leading to the killing of ASG terrorist leaders Khaddafy Janjalani and Jainal Antel Sali Jr. described how the four men received briefcases of cash while wearing masks under tight security.

Amnesty or immunity from prosecution can also be important elements to a successful rewards scheme. For militants who want to turn in Mas Selamat but are wary of being captured themselves, or for civilians helping to harbour Mas Selamat, these factors may be as important as a cash payment.

Information Overload

Authorities offer a reward out of hope that it will bring in that one key tip. However, they can count upon a reward offer to also bring in a glut of unnecessary information and false leads. In less than a year following September 11th, the Rewards for Justice Programme received more than 32,000 tips. With large sums of money involved, there is an incentive to call in a tip on the slightest suspicion. If a government or agency does not have the capacity to sort through the influx, then it will not be able to locate the proverbial needle in the haystack of bad information.

Joint Operations

If security or intelligence services are eligible for rewards, then problems may arise when a terrorists' capture can be ascribed to joint efforts on the part of many agencies. The US ran into this issue following the capture of JI military commander Hambali by Thai authorities. Several different Thai security, law enforcement, and intelligence agencies came to the US embassy to claim the reward which had been offered for Hambali. The US government, which had planned to dispense a reward of US\$1 million, may have forked over as much as 10 million to appease all of the different players involved in Hambali's capture.

PR Pitfall

Offering a reward for a terrorist helps to communicate to the international community a government's commitment to recapturing him. This is part of the justification for a bill introduced by fourteen US congressmen to increase Osama Bin Laden's bounty by nearly 20 times from US\$25 million to US\$500 million. The sky-high amount would function as a signal of the US's continuing commitment to capturing the al-Qaeda leader.

There is a potential downside to attaching a monetary value to a government's determination to catch a terrorist. The amount may be judged to be too small. In this case, a reward of US\$740,000 is one of the smaller bounties to be placed on the head of an international terrorist. In Singapore's case, the government has managed to maintain a degree of distance from this quantity because it was two private businessmen who put forth the reward and decided the amount rather than the government itself. However, the fact remains that the government has taken over the reward, and the assumption is implicit that the amount is sufficient, or the government would add to it.

Anonymity and amnesty

Considering the success of reward programmes in bringing in terrorists and other criminals around the world, Singapore's decision to offer a reward for Mas Selamat is a wise one provided it can navigate the attendant challenges. A campaign advertising the reward should be complete with a promise to respect the anonymity of a potential informant, and possibly an offer of amnesty. Ensuring sufficient capacity to sort through the inflow of tips and information and deftly managing the public relations impact are also necessary.

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