

Police on the diplomatic beat in Asia



Since the Bali bombings, federal police chief Mick Keelty and his corps have been quietly winning over Australia's disaffected Asian neighbours. This article is taken from a feature written by Mark Baker and published in the Melbourne Age in September.

A few hours after the Bali bombings, Australian Federal Police Commissioner Mick Keelty made a call to Indonesian National Police chief General Da'i Bachtiar. It was a conversation in a moment of crisis that would begin a transformation in the relationship between the two police forces, and in Australian law enforcement operations across South-East Asia.

The two men had cemented an evolving friendship during a visit to Australia by Da'i Bachtiar in June last year and Keelty was quick to offer both sympathy and support in response to the terrorist attack that had shaken both nations. The reply, Keelty recalls, was swift and direct: "Mick, I need all the help I can get."

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Later that grim Sunday, the first of an eventual contingent of more than 100 AFP investigators and forensic specialists were on their way to Bali. In the weeks and months that followed, the Australian police, working in tandem with their Indonesian counterparts, skillfully pieced together the trail of evidence that led to the arrest of almost all of the extremists involved in the attack that killed more than 200 people, 88 of them Australians.

The Australians played a key role in the search for clues in the ruins of the Sari Club and Paddy's Bar. They traveled across Indonesia checking the homes and haunts of the suspected bombers. And they were discreetly at hand when a number of the crucial arrests were made.

Indonesia's decision to allow a foreign law enforcement agency to take such a visible and pervasive role on its soil was remarkable in itself – even more so given the tension and unpredictability that has afflicted diplomatic relations between the two neighbours for decades. But Mick Keelty was not surprised.

During Da'i Bachtiar's earlier visit to Australia, the two men had talked a lot about the desirability of a closer working relationship between their forces. "We spent a good deal of time together and during that time he talked to me about the problems in Aceh and Ambon and, ironically, we had talked about providing post-blast analysis to him," says Keelty. "When you spend that amount of quality time to share problems on a very personal basis it makes a difference."

In the year since Bali, the AFP and its plain-talking, hands-on chief have quietly emerged in the vanguard of warming in regional attitudes towards Australia.

While much of the change has been driven by the necessity of closer cooperation to fight the common enemy of terrorism, it has also been a response that recognises Australian security agencies have the skills and resources to make a tough task easier.

Beyond its high-profile work in Indonesia, the AFP, backed by a \$400 million (over four years) boost to its

budget, has expanded its presence in several regional capitals, opened new offices in others and beefed up joint operations and training programs. The force has also been at the forefront of implementing new counter-terrorism agreements signed with Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand and the Philippines, as well as Indonesia.

The strengthening linkages between the AFP and its regional counterparts were acknowledged when Keelty was invited to join the annual meeting in Manila of Aseanapol – the alliance of regional police chiefs – as an official observer. "It's quite an honour for the AFP...It's a compliment to the organisation for the way it has operated in the region," says Keelty, who modestly eschews personal credit.

But others believe that the commissioner's quiet determination to make Asia the frontline in Australia's fight against transnational crime – pushing resources into the region, insisting his regional agents have language skills and cultural backgrounding and persuading the Government to spend more on cooperation with regional agencies – has been a big part of the success.

"Mick's a fairly straight sort of a guy and I'm sure it's correct that a lot of what's being achieved is due to the fact that the AFP has been quite sensitive to local concerns and has been happy to take a back seat," says Clive Williams, a counter-terrorism specialist at



AFP Commissioner Mick Keelty with Indonesian National Police General Da'i Bachtiar at a press conference in Canberra.

the Australian National University. “If it had been the FBI who had gone in to Indonesia after Bali it might have been a different story because they tend to want to take over.”

Jeff Penrose, an international security consultant and former AFP intelligence chief, agrees. “The AFP are prepared to sit back and listen. It’s a different approach, a softer approach, which is the Asian way. If you’re prepared to spend the time, you get results. The Asians like the way the Australians operate.”

But Penrose believes more work is needed to consolidate trust and strengthen cooperation. He says that while the AFP’s relationship with Indonesia is growing, other regional countries appear slower in embracing the Australians. Singapore remains wary about close cooperation with foreigners and police ties with Malaysia are evolving in the shadow of the Mahathir Government’s long-standing antagonism towards Australia.

Keelty, who has spent much of the past year moving around the region building friendships with his counterparts, says the new partnerships are an extension of efforts to build cooperation in fighting drug trafficking over the past decade - during which the AFP became the first foreign police force to post personnel in China and Vietnam.

“Having taken the fight against drugs offshore and working cooperatively within host countries, people got used to the AFP and the way we operated and I think one of the fundamentals of working in Asia is not so much the business you do, but how you do business,” he says.

He argues that, after the September 11 attacks in 2001, the expansion of cooperation into counter-terrorist operations was a natural extension of the work already being done on drugs and people smuggling.

“What terrorism has done, because it is a universal threat, is garner the resolve of the heads of all the agencies...I think we’ve been seen as an honest broker with a

genuine desire to assist. We don’t have the resources of the United States or Japan but we do bring to the table enormous skill and genuine goodwill. I think it’s that good-neighbour and good-corporate-citizen approach that’s been seen by other law enforcement agencies as being beneficial to them.”

The AFP has offered extensive training programs for regional law enforcement officers, both in Australia

and in the region, in intelligence, investigations and forensics. “That has established long-term personal relationships and the benefit of that is a proactive benefit in that you can pick up the phone and you know who it is that you’re talking to at the other end. We’re not being bogged down by bureaucracy.”

The ties with Indonesia – which honoured Keelty with its highest police award in July, conferred personally by President Megawati Sukarnoputri – remain the cornerstone of the AFP’s new profile in South-East Asia.

After the Marriott Hotel bombing, it was almost inevitable that the AFP would again be called on to lend a hand. “One silver lining that has come out of Bali is the joint team we got together,” says Keelty. “Everybody knew each other...They knew what each other’s capability and what each other’s expertise was.”

Keelty says he’s unaware of reported sensitivities within the Indonesian police and security forces in the early stages of Australia’s involvement in the Bali operation.

“I don’t know that there were tensions. There was a time of growing together through the Bali investigation, understanding how we could complement each other and that came to the fore in the Marriott bombing. One of the first conditions of us getting involved...was to recognise that the sovereignty of the Indonesians was absolutely paramount and I think as long as we abide by that rule we are not going to go astray.”

Australian and Indonesia police now have a joint task force coordinating the hunt for the Jemaah Islamiah members linked to the Jakarta blast. But plans for a region-wide task force to track other JI fugitives have been shelved following the crucial arrest last month of Hambali, the movement’s former operations chief.

Keelty believes the terrorist challenge has demonstrated anew the need for Australia to take offshore the fight against threats to its security.

“It’s all too often easy to sit in Australia and wonder why or complain why things aren’t done in countries in the region,” he says. “It is different up here. There are many issues to grapple with and what works in Australia won’t necessarily work here and it’s important we understand that. You can’t stand in your corner of the world and just complain that things aren’t going right in another part of the world. You have to commit yourself to get involved and to assist.”

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