Malaysia, US seek closer ties to fight terrorism

PRESSING ISSUE:
Zahid to meet with American attorney-general, Homeland Security chief

MALAYSIA and the United States (US) are seeking closer ties to tackle cross-border terrorism amid concerns that Malaysia could be one of the bases to train and deploy militants, Home Minister Datuk Seri Ahmad Zahid Hamidi said yesterday.

Zahid said he would be holding talks with US Secretary for Homeland Security Jeh Johnson and US Attorney-General Eric Holder during his nine-day working visit to New York and Washington that began on Sept 24.

He said there had been concerns that Malaysia could be one of the hotbeds to train terrorists and lure some Malaysians to fight in Syria and Iraq.

Malaysia, he said, had been working closely with the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

He said the issue was that some of the active terrorists were said to be Malaysians, with some comprising former Internal Security Act detainees.

"Some of them have trained Malaysians and non-Malaysians to join them to help set up what they called the Islamic State. They used an international network not only to recruit but also to receive overseas funding," he said.

Zahid added that he would talk to the top US officials on both legal and operation aspects in dealing with counter-terrorism.

Zahid said terrorism which involved extremism and radical acts had emerged as a major threat to global peace, with the latest being the jihadists fighting in Syria and Iraq under the banner of the so-called Islamic State (IS).

It is understood that some 34 Malaysians have joined the fight for IS.

He also said some militants were also bent on installing an "Islamic state" in Borneo, by working with certain groups outside Malaysia.

"This has the involvement of separatists from southern Thailand and southern Philippines," he said.

"This is a very dangerous trend and has to be checked. They seemed to be motivated by ISIS or ISIL in Syria and Iraq. They want to spread the influence of IS in the Asian region," he said.

Zahid said one area that needed to be addressed was the aspect of rehabilitation of extremists under detention.

In this respect, Malaysia and the US could cooperate in the area of capacity-building based on the wide experience of the Malaysian police, he said.

Zahid added that, while here, he would also have follow-up talks with the relevant US authorities on Malaysia’s intention to join the US visa waiver programme.

The visa waiver programme will enable Malaysians to enter the US without applying for visas and will allow them to stay in the country for a maximum of 90 days for tourism or business purposes.

To date, some 38 countries have joined the US visa waiver programme.