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Inmates at the Kedung Pane prison in Semarang, Central Java, are among those attending workshops run by three non-governmental groups to teach conflict resolution and negotiation skills. ST PHOTOS: WAHYUDI SOERIAATMADJA

Conflict resolution, prison style

Inmates being taught how to resolve disputes through dialogue instead of violence

By WAHYUDI SOERIAATMADJA
INDONESIA CORRESPONDENT

SEMARANG (Central Java): On a sunny morning recently at the Kedung Pane prison, two scruffy groups of men negotiated over how to split a recent haul of cash.

"We should get more as we have been here longer and we are from the stronger group," said a dark-skinned, bearded inmate who was surrounded by six others.

Some of the other men nodded, while others shook their heads

and started to protest.

This was no post-robbery scene, however, and the men were not carrying out an illegal act. Rather, they were engaged in a role-playing game that aimed to teach them to use dialogue – and not violence – to resolve disputes.

The game was just one of many components of a workshop to teach conflict resolution and negotiation skills to more than 20 inmates.

Kedung Pane prison, a 45-minute drive from the city, has 890 inmates, including burglars, drug dealers and five men convicted for their involvement in the 2002 and 2005 Bali bombings.

The sessions, run by three non-governmental groups – Search for Common Ground, the Institute of International Peace Building and the Legal Aid Institute – lasted five days.

The modules included games and PowerPoint presentations on how to think positively, with trainers also talking about the different religions in Indonesia and persuading the inmates that respecting the different beliefs would not be seen as compromising one's own faith.

Developed by a United States company and used at prisons there, the programme had been adapted to Indonesia's needs, with input from the government, analysts and the public.

"One suggestion analysts gave was that prisoners here

would be more scared of the guards, believing they have no rights, so we included a section in the module on teaching them their rights in prison," said Mr Agus Nahrowi, a trainer from Search for Common Ground.

Another trainer, Mr Wakhit Hasim from Search for Common Ground, said they had tried to strike a balance between promoting positive values and understanding the gritty reality of prison life.

For example, they acknowledged the existence of gangs in Indonesian prisons, although Kedung Pane's chief supervisor Raden Hadiwismobudi told The Straits Times that "extortion and gangs do not exist in this facility".

Like in many other prisons round the world, newcomers here often have to go through an induction process, paying bribes of say, 1 million rupiah (S\$153) to win the approval and protection of senior inmates. These proceeds are sometimes shared between prison guards and inmates.

So, even while Mr Wakhit and his colleagues stressed that "protection fee" extortion and splitting the proceeds were wrong, they chose to use the real-life practices as examples of how dialogue could help two groups forge a greater understanding.

Since the beginning of the year, he and four other trainers have gone to six other prisons, includ-

ing the maximum-security Nusakambangan facility off the coast of Central Java.

They will hold their eighth and last workshop later this month at a prison in Palu, Central Sulawesi, which houses many convicts involved in religion-based violence that rocked the area some years back.

So far, inmates appear to have taken to the workshops.

Abdul Ghoni, 42, who is serving a life sentence at Kedung Pane prison for packaging the explosives used in the 2002 Bali bombing, had attended the workshop as a way to "kill boredom".

"But it is different and unique. I guess I would try to apply it," he said.

Abdul Aziz, 34, who is serving an eight-year sentence for designing a website used by former terrorist ringleader Noordin Top to broadcast a message after the 2005 Bali bombing, agreed.

"The sessions have made me realise that there are people with different ideologies and they should be respected," he said.

And it is not just the inmates who have been learning about conflict resolution.

Some 200m away in a separate hall, prison guards were also undergoing training – in their case, to learn more productive ways of dealing with uncooperative inmates.

"Prison guards tend to use threats – transfer to an isolation cell, a different prison or no parole – to get inmates to behave," noted Mr Nurkholis Hidayat, a trainer from the Legal Aid Institute.

"That is not good. Persuasion and negotiation is a better approach."

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"The sessions have made me realise that there are people with different ideologies and they should be respected."

Abdul Aziz (left), who is serving an eight-year sentence for designing a website used by former terrorist ringleader Noordin Top

Terrorists' life behind bars

SEMARANG (Central Java): Ten years ago, Sarjio, 39, was a cook at a militant camp for the Moro Islamic Liberation Front in the Philippines.

In 2002, however, he went from mixing spices to mixing explosives that were eventually used for the bombing of tourist nightspots in Bali in October that killed more than 200.

It earned the former cook a life sentence, which he is now serving out at the Kedung Pane prison.

Sarjio, who also goes by the name Sawad, said he knew his actions had taken innocent lives. But he claimed he was just following the orders of a key planner of the bombings, Amrozi Nurhasyim, who bought the explosives and a minivan to transport them to Bali.

Amrozi was executed by a firing squad in November 2008.

"My area of operations at that time was the Philippines, not Indonesia. I was just in Indonesia as a guest of Amrozi, so I did what he told me to do," said Sarjio.

His fellow inmate, Abdul Ghoni, who packaged the explosives used in the attack, however, feels remorse for his deed.

He had fasted for 60 days, he said, after the bombing.

"That was after I found out that the bombs killed innocent people," said the 42-year-old, who is also serving a life sentence.

Both men are now appealing to the government to reduce their sentences to 20 years.

Life in prison is generally better for terrorist convicts than it is for regular prisoners because the former get individual cells – so as to reduce the chances of them "radicalising" others.

It is a rare "privilege", given

that Kedung Pane prison is overcrowded, and cells meant for three men are already being used to house six or seven inmates.

"We get greater privacy and it's cleaner," said Abdul Aziz, 34, who created a website used by terrorist leader Noordin Top to broadcast a statement after the 2005 Bali bombing. "We don't have to compete with each other when the meals arrive."

But some say that keeping terrorist convicts separate from other convicts has not always worked. Kept in the same block, they are occasionally allowed to mingle among themselves, thus giving them a chance to discuss radical ideas.

Some have also managed to bribe the prison guards to allow them to keep mobile phones, which they use to communicate with the outside world.

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