

A fugitive's playground?

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PHOTOGRAPHER WEE TECK HIAN



Farms, streams, illegal hideouts – there's plenty in the forest to help a man survive

YOU might have sped along the expressway past this snarl of green. You might even be living in the modern housing estate just 70m from the forest's edge.

It may seem like some primal otherworld. But to dive into the forest at Bukit Panjang – which, with its abundance of vegetable farms, wild-growing fruits and labyrinth of canals, is a natural haven for a fugitive on the run – it is as easy as crossing over a park's borders or dashing across a four-lane flyover.

Once there, a network of jungle trails takes you anywhere through the massive central catchment area, whether from Lornie Road to Mandai Road, or from the Seletar Expressway to Chestnut Avenue.

Alternatively, if you so chose, you could lose yourself effortlessly in an area the size of 3,000 football fields and encompassing three reservoirs – a region webbed with partly-covered canals that offer both the perfect hideout and a way to move discreetly below-ground over long distances.

But how would you survive? Easily, if you were a terrorist leader who knew the basics of sur-

vival and was skilled at trekking.

Over four hours, this city-bred reporter – with the help of a local farmer and a companion trained in jungle survival – came across patches of spinach, tapioca, sweet potatoes and yam grown on the fringes of the forest.

Some of this largesse is courtesy of the green-fingered retirees who are enthusiastic participants in community garden projects established by the Bukit Panjang Group Representation Constituency.

Maintained daily, these farms are ingeniously irrigated by man-made streams or water from dammed up channels.

But, further into the forest, you find a different breed of farms – haphazard plots not on any official register, with hand-painted banners and raffia string demarcating boundaries and warning off thieves.

The primary forest, meanwhile, is itself a rich source of edible plants and animals, and learning how to identify or trap these, or to build a shelter, would be one of the first things a survivalist learns.

Even had it not been raining frequently in recent weeks, finding water would not pose a big problem.

Pointing to one of the many gushing streams criss-crossing the landscape, the farmer who was

MPS TABLE QUESTIONS ON MAS SELAMAT INQUIRY

Home Affairs Minister Wong Kan Seng is expected to give an update on the hunt for Jemaah Islamiyah fugitive Mas Selamat Kastari and the investigations into his escape when Parliament sits on April 21.

At least four Members of Parliament (MPs) have filed questions on the subject.

Among them, MP Teo Ho Pin, who chairs the Government Parliamentary Committee (GPC) for Home Affairs and Law, has asked for an update on the findings of the independent Committee of Inquiry (COI). "It's been one-and-a-half months, so I'd like to ask if the findings have been completed," Dr Teo told TODAY.

The COI, chaired by a retired judge, is investigating how Mas Selamat escaped from the Internal Security Department's Whitley Road detention centre. It has also been tasked to recommend improvements to procedures. The Criminal Investigation Department is also conducting an investigation.

MP Ho Geok Choo, one of the MPs who tabled a question on the Mas Selamat saga, has asked how Singaporeans can be more vigilant.

Questions have also been tabled by opposition MP Low Thia Khiang and Non-Constituency MP Sylvia Lim. — NEO CHAI CHIN

showing this reporter around joked: "It's like a spa there. The illegal immigrants love to bathe here."

His smile, however, fades quickly at the mention of Mas Selamat Kastari.

The escape of the former Jemaah Islamiyah leader has brought unwelcome disruption to the serenity of the farms, what with the heavy presence of gurkhas, police and army officers and their sniffer dogs.

The authorities have since scaled down their search in forested areas, relying instead on a more targeted approach based on intelligence.

Like some Singaporeans, the

farmers wonder if a fugitive could indeed survive for months in this wild portion of Singapore, even with the ready supply of food and water. Without fire to cook the food and boil the water, he would not survive for long, the farmers said.

But matches and lighters are not hard to come by in this particular forest – it is a known hideout for the illegal immigrants-cum-cigarette peddlers from Bau Bau, Sulawesi.

Despite stepped-up patrols by Singapore Customs and Certis Cisco, the Bau Bau group is still active in the area, according to the farmers who see them almost daily.

Their presence is obvious even to the first-time visitor: Man-made shelters, clothes hangers littering the canal, food wrappers under the flyovers, woks stacked under a tree.

Living in makeshift huts and bathing in the canals, these illegal immigrants play a cat-and-mouse game every night, emerging from the thick foliage at Petir Road off Dairy Farm to peddle their cigarettes to drivers who stop their cars there.

One cannot help but speculate: Might these peddlers, living outside society and outside the law, have formed an impromptu support network for Mas Selamat – a recognisable figure among Indonesians after his earlier high-profile escapes while in the custody of Indonesian authorities?

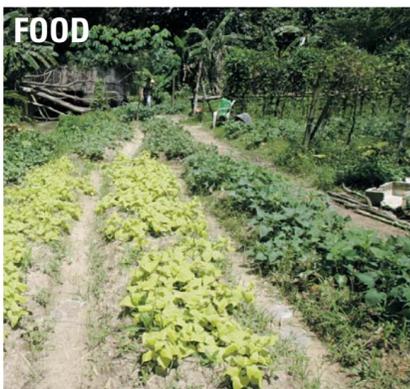
If so, would he be tempted to seek their help in leaving the country, by some discreet means?

Then again, perhaps after all he might not be in their patch of forest. What Singaporean urbanites might be surprised to learn is that about one-fifth of the island is under forest cover.

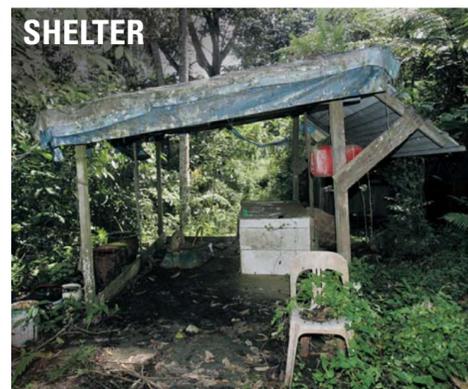
One thing this reporter now has few doubts about, after his eye-opening trek through the forest: It would be naive to dismiss the possibility that, even after six weeks, a fugitive could remain hidden and alive in this wild side of Singapore.



FOOD



SHELTER



WATER



VAST EXPANSE: View of the stretch of Bukit Panjang forest the TODAY team explored yesterday. A fifth of Singapore is covered by forest.

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