

Islamist terror threat in Malacca, Singapore Straits

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Kuala Lumpur/Singapore, March 4 (IANS) Malaysian and Singapore authorities Thursday said a terrorist group could be planning attacks on ships in the Straits of Malacca and the Singapore Straits.

While the Singapore Navy did not name any group, John Harrison, a maritime security expert at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies in the city state, said Al Qaeda and its Southeast Asia ally Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) may be the culprits.

'JI could certainly be one of the groups. We have not seen any public evidence indicating they have the capability to operate, but that does not mean they are not developing them,' Harrison said.

In its advisory, the Singapore Navy recommended that ships should 'strengthen their on-board security measures and adopt community reporting to increase awareness and strengthen the safety of all seafarers'.

'The terrorists' intent is probably to achieve widespread publicity and showcase that it remains a viable group,' it said in its advisory.

It reminded shipping operators that the militants could use smaller vessels such as dinghies and speedboats to attack oil tankers and urged them to take precautions.

Pirates and robbers have used small fishing vessels to board ships during previous attacks in the Malacca Straits, it noted.

Singapore, a regional base for thousands of multinational companies, is a prime target for attacks by militant groups, officials have said.

Noel Chung, the International Maritime Bureau Piracy Reporting Centre's head of Asian region, said that while threats of piracy were common in the two straits, a terror threat against ships was new to the waters.

Chung advised ships plying both straits to be extra vigilant and conduct radar lookouts.