



Singapore alerts ships to piracy threat

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SINGAPORE, March 5 (UPI) -- Tankers and large cargo ships using the Malacca Strait should tighten on-board security after a warning by the Singapore navy of an imminent pirate attacks.

According to brief news reports, the navy has released little information other than to say that an unnamed group is believed to be planning attacks in the near future. The warning was issued by the navy's Information Fusion Center, set up last April to coordinate data from several multinational organizations monitoring piracy.

The 600-mile Malacca Strait -- shared by Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia -- is particularly prone to attacks because of the high volume of shipping. Around one-third of the world's crude oil transported on the high seas passes through the area.

However, most of the attacks are by pirate groups intent on grabbing money and high-value goods rather than making a political statement. Many use fast dinghies, speedboats or renovated fishing boats.

The navy's warning said the expected attack may be done not purely for money but additionally to show the group has clout on the high seas.

But John Harrison, a maritime security expert at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies in Singapore, said al-Qaida and its Southeast Asia ally Jemaah Islamiyah may be the culprits.

"JI could certainly be one of the groups," he was quoted as saying by the Indo-Asian News Service. "We have not seen any public evidence indicating they have the capability to operate but that does not mean they are not developing them."

Noel Chung, head of the Asian region for the International Maritime Bureau Piracy Reporting Center, said that while threats of piracy were common in the area, a terrorist-style threat against ships was new. He advised ships plying both the Malacca Strait and the smaller Singapore Strait to be extra vigilant.

Singapore Strait, 60 miles long and around 10 miles wide, is situated between the Strait of Malacca in the west and the South China Sea in the east. Singapore is on the north of the channel.

The Singapore navy's Information Fusion Center coordinates information collected by the Western Pacific Naval Symposium Regional Maritime Information Exchange and the Malacca Straits Patrols' Information System. It works closely with other centers, including the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships Information Sharing Center.

At the end of February pirates off the coast of Somalia released a Greek-owned, Panama-registered bulk carrier and its crew of 19. A ransom had been paid for release of the 52,000-ton ship, the Greek captain and Filipino crew. It was hijacked Dec. 28 in the Indian Ocean while en route to Oman on the northeast African coast.

According to the European Union Naval Force, Somali pirates operating off their coast, one of the world's busiest maritime trade routes, collected around \$60 million in ransom in 2009. After the latest releases, they still hold four vessels and 99 seafarers.

Ransom payments continue to be controversial, a report in the London Daily Telegraph newspaper said. Britain has warned that ransom payments could encourage more kidnaps.

However, the United Kingdom denied blocking an independent negotiator from trying to agree a price for a British couple and their yacht held hostage in Somalia since Oct. 23.

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