

## Singapore boosts security after reported threat of terrorist attack on ships

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Alex Kennedy, THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

SINGAPORE - Singapore raised its security alert and bolstered its defences Friday after receiving information of a terrorist plot to attack vessels off the coast of the city-state in one of the world's busiest shipping lanes, a Cabinet minister said.



THE ASSOCIATED PRESS/Wong Maye-E

Ships are seen off the coast of Singapore. Singapore's Navy is warning that a terrorist group is planning attacks on oil tankers in the Malacca Straits.

ENLARGE PHOTO

Malaysia and Indonesia have also stepped up maritime and air patrols in the Malacca Strait, where millions of barrels of oil pass daily. Singapore's navy warned Thursday that a terrorist group was planning attacks on oil tankers and other vessels but provided no details.

"All alert levels have been raised," Home Affairs Minister Wong Kan Seng told Parliament, saying that the government has increased security at border crossings, airports, sea ports and at high-risk targets such as two new casino resorts.

Wong did not say which terrorist group was planning the reported attack.

"We received intelligence from our liaison partners about this possible plot to go and attack vessels

coming through Singapore waters through the Malacca Strait," Wong said. "As a result, the various security agencies have been working very closely with one another."

Until about a year ago, the strait was infested with pirates that hijacked ships, and such attacks were a regular occurrence. But joint operations by security forces of countries around the waterway has all but ended such attacks there.

A Singapore-based terrorism expert said al-Qaida and the Southeast Asian militant group Jemaah Islamiyah - blamed for twin bombings last year on hotels in Jakarta - would be the most likely to carry out such an attack.

"Certainly we know that in the past al-Qaida has had not only the intentions, but the capabilities to operate in the maritime environment," said John Harrison, assistant professor at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies.

Suspected JI operatives have been previously been arrested in Singapore.

On Friday, Indonesia's Police Chief Gen. Bambang Hendarso Danuri, who earlier told reporters that they were investigating whether militants they'd arrested in Aceh were tied to the threat, said Friday that no link had been found. Officials have effectively ruled out the possibility that the suspects, some of whom have been interrogated by police for more than a week, were the source of intelligence for Singapore's navy.

Harrison said Singapore's warning likely reflects a credible threat.

"Both the Singapore navy and Home Affairs Ministry are not bodies that are known to hype any threats," Harrison said. "If they are putting this information out, it means they are very concerned that something may be developing."

"The shipping industry should and is taking this very seriously," he added.

The Singapore navy said Thursday that small fishing boats or speedboats were used in past successful terrorist attacks against ships, and these kinds of vessels could be used in the Malacca Strait.

The strait, which is 1.7 miles (2.7 kilometres) at its narrowest point, is formed by the west coast of Malaysia and the east coast of Indonesia's Sumatra island. Singapore, one of the world's busiest ports, lies at the southern tip of the Malay peninsula along the strait. According to the U.S. Energy Information Agency, 15 million barrels of oil a day passed through the strait in 2006.

Wong said a new police and fire station would help protect Marina Bay Sands, a \$5.5 billion casino-resort being built by the U.S.-based Las Vegas Sands due to open in Singapore April 27. Resorts World Sentosa, built by Malaysia's Genting Bhd., opened the city-state's first casino last month.

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