



Singapore says terror attacks planned on oil tankers

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An unidentified terrorist group is planning attacks against oil tankers in the Malacca Strait, one of the world's busiest shipping lanes, Singapore warned on Thursday.

The Singapore Shipping Association said it had received an advisory from the Singapore Navy Information Fusion Centre about "an indication that a terrorist group is planning attacks on oil tankers in the Malacca Strait."

It said "this does not preclude possible attacks on other large vessels with dangerous cargo."

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

It warned shipping operators that the militants could use smaller vessels such as dinghies and speedboats to attack oil tankers, emulating attacks by Somali pirates in the high seas off the Horn of Africa.

Pirates and robbers have also used small fishing vessels to board ships during previous attacks in the Malacca Strait, the navy said.

Analysts have said that the Malacca Strait, bordered by Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia, is a prime target because more than 30 percent of global trade and half the world's oil shipments pass through the narrow waterway.

Singapore, one of Asia's most affluent cities and a regional base for thousands of multinational companies, is a prime target for attacks by militant groups, officials have said.

One of the plots foiled by Singapore authorities was a plan by Islamic militants to hijack an airliner in Bangkok and crash it into Changi airport in 2001 following the September 11 attacks in the United States.

Singapore has also arrested several militants allegedly involved in a plot to bomb the US embassy and other targets in the city-state.

"If the Singapore Navy is providing this information, it should be taken very seriously," said John Harrison, a maritime security expert at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies in Singapore.

"Certainly, we do know that there has been a long-term concern about terrorism in the Malacca Strait but the threat level remains fairly low," Harrison told AFP.

"That said, it was very prudent for the Singapore Navy to pass this warning along because it keeps the threat level where it is."

While the navy did not name any group, Harrison said the Southeast Asia-based Jemaah Islamiyah militant group or Osama bin Laden's Al-Qaeda network could not be ruled out.

"JI would 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," he said.

Both Malaysia and Indonesia responded to Singapore's warning by saying they would help the city-state to defend the passage against piracy.

"Indonesia will step up security in the Malacca Strait. We'll not only send more personnel there, but those with expertise," Sagom Tamboen, a spokesman for Indonesia's military told AFP.

"We'll be coordinating with Malaysia and Singapore. We'll increase vigilance and also anticipate possibilities of attacks and share any information," he added.

Isa Munir, a top Malaysian marine police officer, said the authorities had received information on Sunday that "Islamic activists were trying to do some havoc" in the Malacca Strait.

While the threat "is not specific" Malaysia was taking it seriously, said Isa, the marine police operations force commander.

"We have stepped up sea patrols and air surveillance. We advise ships to ply close to Malaysian waters. If they are in Malaysian waters, then we can provide security and ensure their safety," Isa told AFP in Kuala Lumpur.

"Yesterday, we deployed two aircraft."

In its advisory, the Singapore Navy urged ships to "strengthen their onboard security measures and to adopt community reporting to increase awareness and strengthen the safety of all seafarers," according to the shipping association.

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Singapore-attacks-shipping