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Terror alert for Malacca oil tankers

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Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia have increased patrols in the Malacca Strait after Singapore warned that a terrorist group was planning attacks on the waterway.

Maritime authorities said they had warned ships plying the Malacca Strait and Singapore straits to take precautions after Singapore warned of a threat to attack oil tankers and other vessels in the strategic lane.

The Singapore Shipping Association has 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."

"This does not preclude possible attacks on other large vessels with dangerous cargo," the association said.

"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. Similar tactics are used by Somali pirates infesting 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.

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

"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.

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 cannot 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.

Isa Munir, a top Malaysian marine police officer, said Malaysia has stepped up sea patrols and air surveillance.

"We advise ships to ply close to Malaysian waters, then we can provide security and ensure their safety." Isa said

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