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Terror threat in straits

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PETALING JAYA: The alarm has been sounded over a terror threat against ships plying the Straits of Malacca and the Singapore Strait.

International Maritime Bureau piracy reporting centre Asian region head Noel Choong said it had been alerted by a foreign agency and had passed this on to the relevant authorities in Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia.

He said while piracy threats were common in both straits, a terror threat against ships was new to the waters.

“This alert was not issued by us so we cannot tell you what level or how serious the threat is,” he told *The Star*.

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

“Usually, ships keep a lookout after dark to thwart pirate attacks.

We are advising them to keep a 24-hour watch,” he said.

Foreign news wire AFP reported the Singapore navy and a shipping association in the republic warning that an unidentified terrorist group was planning attacks against oil tankers in Malacca Straits which is one of the world’s busiest shipping lanes.

The Singapore Shipping Association said it had received an advisory from its Navy Information Fusion Centre “indicating that a terrorist group was planning attacks on oil tankers in the Malacca Straits.”

It was also quoted as saying that “this did not preclude possible attacks on other large vessels with dangerous cargo.”

The navy had said in its advisory that the terrorists’ intent was to probably achieve “widespread publicity and showcase that it remained a viable group.”

It also reminded shipping operators that militants could use smaller vessels such as dinghies and speedboats to attack oil tankers, adding that pirates and robbers had utilised small fishing vessels in their previous attacks.

Security analysts have said the Malacca Straits, bordered by Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia, is a prime target because more than 30% of global trade and half the world’s oil shipment pass through the narrow waterway.

Singapore’s S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies maritime security expert John Harrison said the navy’s “indication” was lower than a “warning”.

A “warning” refers to a credible threat that an attack is likely to be carried out against a target over a specific timeframe while an “indication” is gathered from a series of suspicious activities in a certain area.

While the navy has not named any group, the South-East Asia-based Jemaah Islamiah militant group or al-Qaeda itself cannot be ruled out.