

Date: 25th November 2016

"Making the maritime environment a safer place to live and work"



Safety and Security in the Sulu and Celebes Sea



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Overview

There has been a surge in the number of vessels attacked in the Sulu and Celebes Sea in 2016 which is causing increasing concern to MAST and regional vessel operators.

The terror group Abu Sayyaf has claimed a number of the attacks and several others have been attributed to the militant group as well as other opportunistic maritime criminals. The modus operandi of the group is to approach vessels at high speed and fire upon the vessel with small arms with the intention of boarding. Once on board crew members are abducted and items of value are stolen. The crew are then held for ransom.

According to a recent incident alert issued by ReCAAP, on 21st November 2016, since March 2016 there have been 44 crew members abducted and 11 are still in captivity.

Figure 1 shows MAST's Risk Map and depicts incidents which have occurred to date in 2016.

Initially fishing vessels, tugs and vessels under tow were specifically targeted. But recent incidents and attempts demonstrate that larger commercial vessels are being targeted as well.

In response, Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines have agreed to initiate joint army training to advance efforts to secure the Sulu and Celebes Seas. The Indonesian Defence Minister recently explained that the countries would begin individual efforts to train personnel in January 2017 which are capable of effectively responding to Abu Sayyaf and any other maritime criminals. Joint training between the countries is planned for later that year.

Meanwhile, it is important that vessels make their own safety and security arrangements. To date, the majority of advice provided by industry organisations has been to avoid the entire region. On examination it can be seen that avoiding the region may not be a viable option given the distances a diversion route might incur.

This intelligence report offers a wider range of recommendations to reduce the chance of a successful pirate attack.



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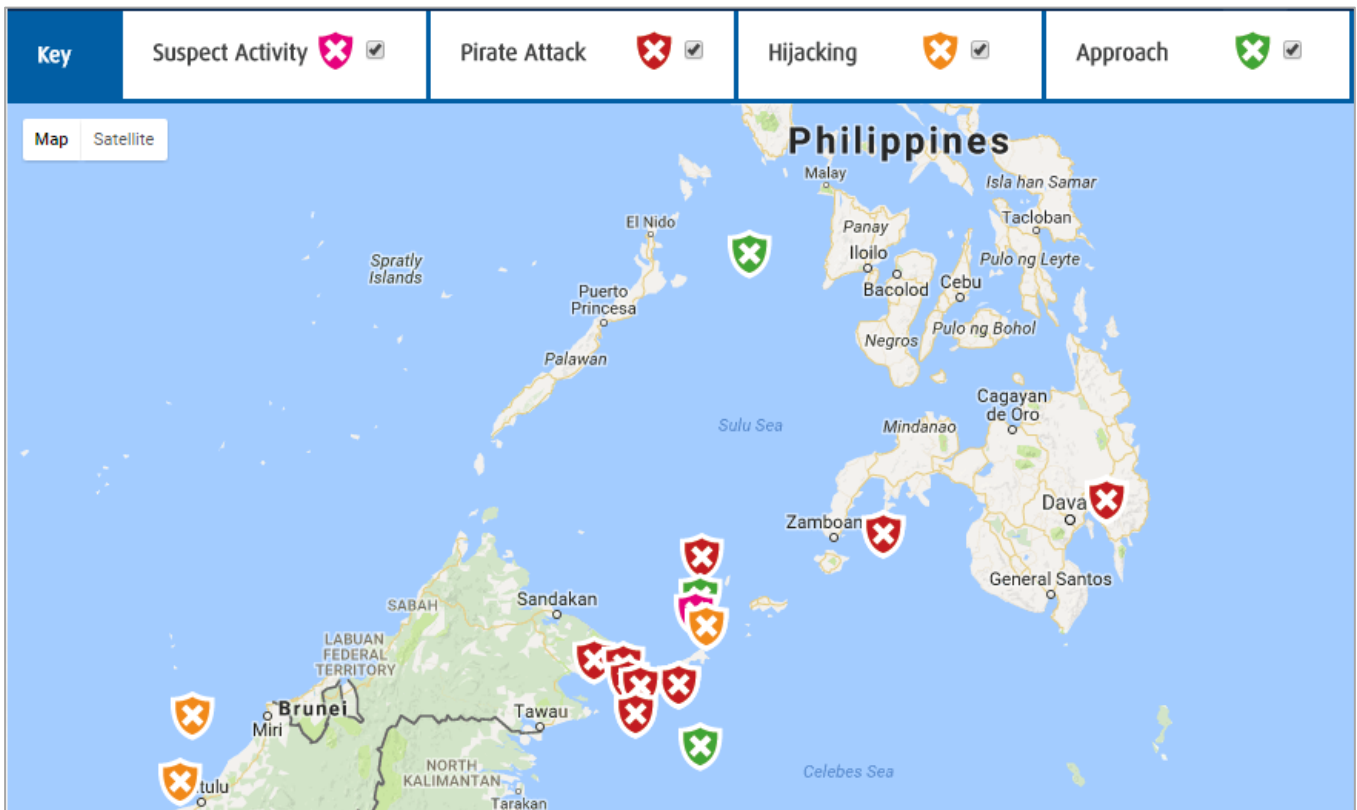


Figure 1: MAST's Risk Map of incident in 2016

Analysis

The Sulu and Celebes Seas are bordered by the Philippines, Malaysia and Indonesia. The entirety of the Sulu Sea is Philippine internal waters and the majority of the incidents occur within, or in close proximity to Territorial Waters. This makes combating the threat and providing assistance the duty of the coastal States. The local authorities currently lack the capacity to police the entire area and programs to improve the quality of personnel and assets will not be delivered for some months.

Industry advice to avoid the Sulu and Celebes Sea is supported by MAST. This will add a considerable distance to a vessels passage and may not be possible if the vessel is bound for a local port.

The majority of the attacks on vessels occur within close proximity to the Tawi Tawi island chain and the Malaysian eastern seaboard. This is the area risk is highest. If transiting north/south through the region we advise that the area is avoided by routing to the east, close to Mindanao Island.

There has however been a recent incident close to Zamboanga on 10th November 2016. During which, armed men boarded the bulk carrier Royal 16 stealing ships properties and abducting six crew members before fleeing in their speed boat. One of the crew was injured during the incident.

Given this incident vessels are advised to remain vigilant in that area and observe the security precautions outlined below.

To date several vessels have been able to stop pirates boarding by implementing BMP 4 measures. This includes vessel hardening, a high vessel speed, activation of fire hoses and vessel manoeuvring. Furthermore, with the consistent operating model of Abu Sayyaf and other maritime criminals being kidnap for ransom, vessels can considerably reduce the chances of crew being kidnapped by having an effective citadel and practiced citadel drills. This is the safest course of action if attacked; to retreat all crew into a secure citadel where there is control over the engines, steering and there is access to communication equipment. From there authorities can be contacted for assistance.

Recommendations

If possible it is recommended that vessels re-route around the Sulu and Celebes Sea.

If vessels are transiting through the Celebes and Sulu Seas it is advised that:

- A vigilant watch is maintained
- Vessels proceed at maximum sustainable speed
- Vessel hardening measures are deployed
- Citadels are operational and drills are conducted
- If possible route to the eastern side of the Sulu and Celebes Seas
- Emergency drills are practiced
- Monitor shipping activity to gain an understanding of the pattern of life in the area and ensure Masters are ready to take measures if they see something out of place.

MAST continues to closely monitor the situation and will provide updates were appropriate.

To discuss a security concern or requirements please contact MAST on:

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