



## TRENDS IN PIRACY AND ARMED SEA ROBBERY IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

*Jane Chan and Joshua Ho\**

21 March 2007

### Regional Trends

THE overall number of piracy attacks and armed robbery at sea in Southeast Asia appears to be trending downward. The 4<sup>th</sup> quarter of 2006 – the latest record currently available -- has shown the lowest number of piracy and armed robbery activities in Southeast Asian seas for the last five years. Theft and/or robbery remained the main types of attacks on ships transiting the sea lanes of Southeast Asia. This suggests that small-scale attacks remained the main challenge in dealing with the problem of piracy within the region, especially in Indonesia. These attacks often involve smaller boats with outboard motors that are easy to manoeuvre, and the perpetrators are usually armed with knives or small-arms.

Data collected on the types of weapons used during an attack is often not comprehensive as an average one-third of reported cases each year omit such information. However, more attention should be paid to the types of weaponry of armed robbers as the use of small arms is getting increasingly common. The yearly average since 2003 shows that more than half of the actual attacks were carried out by pirates armed with guns. However this trend is not reflected in the comparison of fourth quarter data over the previous five years. Generally though, an analysis of fourth quarter trends in weapons-use over the last five years suggests that knives were the weapon of choice for piracy attacks and armed robbery at sea.

An examination of the consolidated annual trend over the last five years shows that bulk carriers were the most common target in the region. This could be attributed to the slower transit speed of the bulk carriers, their low freeboard, and smaller crew. However, this trend is not obvious when examining the quarterly data for the year 2006. This could suggest that a greater diversity of vessels is now being targeted. Besides attacks on bulk carriers, there were also a high number of attacks on fishing vessels as well as different types of tankers.

The fair weather during the second quarter of each year could have contributed to the higher incidence rate as compared to the fourth quarter of each year. The calmer sea conditions may have made it more conducive for small-scale armed robbery activities. This argument is best illustrated in the case of the Malacca Strait. As the monsoon period generally occurs within the fourth quarter of any year, the sea robbers may thus have limited their activities closer to shore to avoid the higher sea states and thus lower the risk to their operations.

Although the number of incidents is relatively lower during the fourth quarter of the year, ships and vessels remained vulnerable at ports or anchorage throughout the year. The majority of the attacks each year are those that take place at locations closer to shore, and within the vicinity of ports or anchorages. This might suggest that ships on local voyages are attacked more often than those on international voyages. This is because ships on

international voyages tend to transit on the sea lanes, whilst those on regional voyages tend to transit closer to shore.

### **Hot Spots**

As in the same period in 2005, the Malacca Strait recorded a lower incidence rate during the fourth quarter as compared to the third quarter in 2006. Despite the downward trend since 2005, there is no room for complacency. This is because there has been a slight uptake in the number of incidents since the third quarter of 2006. The majority of the attacks involved the use of small arms; two out of the five of such attacks were in fact cases of kidnap-for-ransom. The main concern for the Malacca Strait would be the possibility of the pirates and armed robbers resorting to more violent and sophisticated operations.

Generally Indonesia has been experiencing a lower incidence rate of piracy since the third quarter of 2005. Even so, most attacks in the region still occur in Indonesian waters. Apart from those situated along the Malacca Strait, ports and anchorages along the Sunda and Makassar Straits recorded some of the highest incidences of piracy and armed robbery. Theft and robbery were the more common types of attacks, contributing to two-thirds of the numbers of actual attacks, many of which were armed with knives. Bulk carriers and containers were the common targets of such attacks over the last five years.

Although the number of attacks in the Makassar Strait had dropped dramatically in 2006, it should still be a point of focus should the trend starts moving upwards. In contrast to the downward trend in other parts of the region, the number of attacks in 2006 for the Sunda Strait was comparable to the last five years. More importantly, one should also note the rather low figures on reported attempted attacks. Two separate conclusions may be drawn from this. The first is that there has always been under-reporting on piracy and armed robbery cases in the Sunda Strait, thus affecting the actual figures recorded. Another interpretation of the low figures of attempted attacks is the high success rate of such attacks.

### **What to look out for**

In 2006, the number of piracy and arm-robbery attacks in Southeast Asian seas has been the lowest in the last five years. However, it is too early to tell if this figure will remain low in the years to come. Neither would be it be prudent to start attributing success to any of the efforts implemented thus far for the purposes of dealing with this regional problem.

One should also start paying more attention to the Sunda Strait as it has been recording relatively high numbers of attacks with the region for the past three years. Comparative figures show that the piracy and armed robbery incidences in the Malacca Strait is trending downward. As commercial vessels are more able to enhance their security capabilities, small-scale fishing vessels operating in the region remained the most vulnerable. Given that recent attacks are also getting more violent in nature, more ought to be done to ensure the safety and security of all users of the regional waterways.

One other concern is the risk of terrorist attacks, making high vigilance in Southeast Asia a necessity. On 9 November 2006, Indonesian authorities boarded one *MV Rose* at the Cita Tubindo port in Batam and found a container filled with explosive materials. Although there was no evidence to date suggesting that such materials were transported for terrorist purposes within the region, one cannot negate the possibility of such cargo being robbed or hijacked, thus being used for unknown ends.

---

*\* Jane Chan is an Associate Research Fellow and Joshua Ho is a Senior Fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University.*