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Update of ReCAAP ISC Advisory - Abduction of Crew from Ships in Sulu-Celebes Seas

ReCAAP Information Sharing Centre

21 Media Circle, #05-04

Singapore 138562

Tel: (65) 6376 3091

Fax: (65) 6376 3066

Web: <http://www.recaap.org>

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Introduction

1. The ReCAAP ISC was extremely concerned with the large-scale increase in incidents of abduction of crew for ransom situation in the Sulu-Celebes Seas and waters off Eastern Sabah since March 2016. On 21 Nov 2016, the Centre published an Incident Alert titled *Increasing Cases of Abduction of Crew for Ransom from Ships*, advising ships to **re-route from the area, where possible**. The ship masters and crew are otherwise urged to exercise extra vigilance while transiting the area and report immediately to the Operation Centre of the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) and Eastern Sabah Security Command (ESSCOM) of Malaysia. The threat level of abduction of crew was then deemed to be 'HIGH' as the abduction of crew has not waned.

Improvement in situation


2. With the concerted efforts undertaken by the Philippine and Malaysian authorities, no abduction of crew incidents was reported since January 2020; and no crew is presently held in captivity by Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG). With the notable improvement in the situation, the ReCAAP ISC in consultation with the PCG downgraded the threat level of the abduction of crew from 'HIGH' to 'POTENTIALLY HIGH' in May 2022. In September of the same year, the PCG in consultation with relevant government agencies, and regional partners have come up with a risk-assessment pertaining to the prevailing situation in the Sulu-Celebes seas, which eventually manifested in further downgrading of the threat level of the abduction of crew from 'POTENTIALLY HIGH' to '**MODERATE**' which implies that ***'Incidents are possible to occur, but are relatively less severe in nature.'*** On 15 September 2022, the ReCAAP ISC updated its advisory to all ships to **consider re-route from the area as an option based on its prerogative**.

Re-assessment and downgrading of threat level by PCG

3. The measures undertaken by the Philippine Government in Zamboanga, Sulu, and Tawi-Tawi, with the conduct of continuous military operations and dismantling the support base of the ASG in Sulu archipelago, ensures the likelihood of the end of the group through surrender, arrest, and neutralization. The PCG, coordinated with other stakeholders and counterparts that have vital involvement in the maritime security of the Sulu-Celebes Seas, reviewed the threat situation and recommended downgrading the present threat level of 'Abduction of crew for ransom in the Sulu-Celebes Seas' from 'MODERATE' to '**MODERATE LOW**', which implies that ***'Incidents are unlikely to occur due to perpetrators' perceived lack of capability to orchestrate an attack. Nevertheless, minimal damages are expected to the vessel and crew in case of an attack'***.

Update of ReCAAP ISC Advisory

4. The threat on abduction of crew for ransom in the Sulu-Celebes Seas remained low and there has been no incident due to the successful military operations and robust law enforcement initiatives by the Philippines Government. The PCG having reviewed and recommended further downgrading of the threat level of abduction of crew for ransom in the Sulu-Celebes seas, the ReCAAP ISC updated its Advisory to all ships to “**exercise vigilance and adopt necessary preventive measures while transiting the area**”. The ships are to maintain communication with the authorities and report all incidents to the Operation Centres of the Philippines and ESSCOM as indicated in contact details:



Map 3 – Contact details

- 1 Philippine Coast Guard District Southwestern Mindanao**
Tel: +63 998 585 7972
+63 917 842 8446
VHF: Channel 16 with call-sign “NEPTUNE”
Email: hcgdswm@yahoo.com
- 2b Philippine Navy – Littoral Monitoring Station (LMS), Bongao, Tawi-Tawi**
Tel: +63 955 714 0153
VHF: Channel 16
Email: jointtaskgroup@gmail.com
- 2a Philippine Coast Guard Station, Bongao (Central Tawi-Tawi)**
Tel: +63 998 585 7941
+63 917 842 8402
VHF: Channel 16
Email: cgd_tawi2@yahoo.com
- 3 Eastern Sabah Security Command (ESSCOM)**
Tel: +60 89863181/016
Fax: +60 89863182
VHF: Channel 16 with call-sign “ESSCOM”
Email: bilikgerakan_esscom@jpm.gov.my

Contact Details

5. In the event that the ship master or crew is unable to establish contact with the Operation Centres of the Philippines as listed above, the **Philippine Coast Guard Command Centre** can be contacted at the following link for reporting of incident.

Tel: +632-8-527-8481 (ext: 6136/37)
+632-998-585-5327 (mobile)
+632-917-842-8249 (mobile)
+632-8-527-3877 (fax)

Email: pcgcomcen@coastguard.gov.ph