

22 March 2023



Special Report on Incidents Involving Tug Boats and Barges in Singapore Strait

ReCAAP Information Sharing Centre

21 Media Circle, #05-04

Singapore 138562

Tel: (65) 6376 3091

Fax: (65) 6376 3066

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

Brief extracts from the report may be reproduced for non-commercial use provided the source is acknowledged. Request for extensive reproduction should be made to ReCAAP Information Sharing Centre (ISC), who owns the copyright of this document.

SR 01/2023

22 March 2023

Incidents involving tug boats and barges in Singapore Strait

1. The number of incidents occurred on board tug boats towing barges in the Singapore Strait (SS) has increased in 2022. During 2022, a total of 14 incidents were reported. Of these, 11 incidents reported loss of scrap metal from barges; similar number of incidents was also reported in 2019 in the SS. It is the **highest** number of theft/robbery of scrap metal from barges while underway in the SS in a year.
2. Although all incidents of theft/robbery of scrap metal were CAT 4, where the perpetrators not armed and the crew not injured, the ReCAAP ISC is concerned with the continued occurrence of such incidents in the SS. During January-February 2023, a total of another four incidents of theft/robbery of scrap metal from barges were reported in the SS. With 15 incidents occurred over a period of 14 months (Jan 2022-Feb 2023), an average of one incident per month, is a cause for concern and draws the attention of the authorities.
3. This Special Report is to alert the shipping industry and law enforcement agencies to the continued occurrence of incidents of theft/robbery of scrap metal from barges in the SS. The Report provides an insight of the incidents, the modus operandi of the perpetrators and recommendations to the tug boat industry and authorities to prevent the reoccurrence of incidents.
4. The ReCAAP ISC commends the law enforcement agencies for making arrests of the perpetrators in 2019 and 2022. The Centre encourages the littoral States to further strengthen the conduct of joint coordinated patrols, increase enforcement in their respective waters and promote sharing of information on the latest situation and the criminal groups involved in order to make **more arrests and prosecute the perpetrators**.
5. On the other hand, the tug boat master and crew are advised to exercise enhanced vigilance, sharp lookout, keep abreast of the latest situation, and report immediately all incidents, suspicious activities, and presence of boats in the vicinity to the nearest coastal State. It is only through collective efforts and shared responsibility of all stakeholders, we can curb the occurrence of this transnational crime to ensure safe and secured seas for all, and bring about economic growth and prosperity in the region.

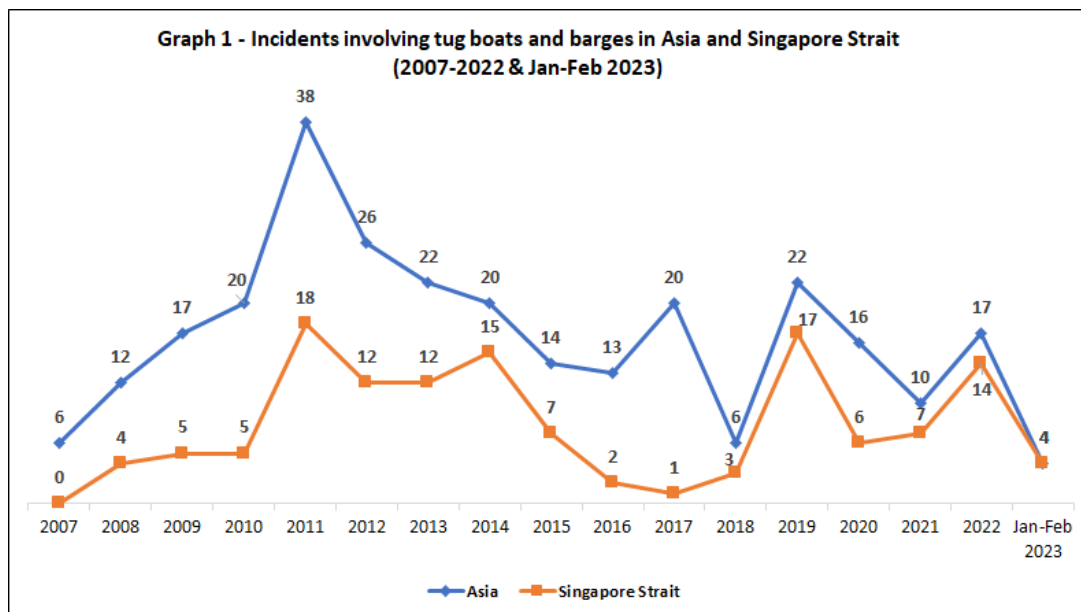
Incidents involving tug boats and barges in Singapore Strait

Overview

Incidents involving tug boats and barges in Asia during 2007-2022 & Jan-Feb 2023

1. During 2007-2022 and Jan-Feb 2023, a total of **283** incidents occurred to tug boats towing barges in Asia. Of this, **47%** (132 of 283) incidents occurred in the **Singapore Strait (SS)** and **1%** (4 of 283) incidents occurred in the **Malacca Strait (MS)**. The locations of the 283 incidents in Asia is listed in Annex A.

2. The total number of incidents in Asia (283 incidents) and in the Singapore Strait (132 incidents) for the past 17-year period is shown in Graph 1.



Type of incidents involving tug boats and barges in Asia

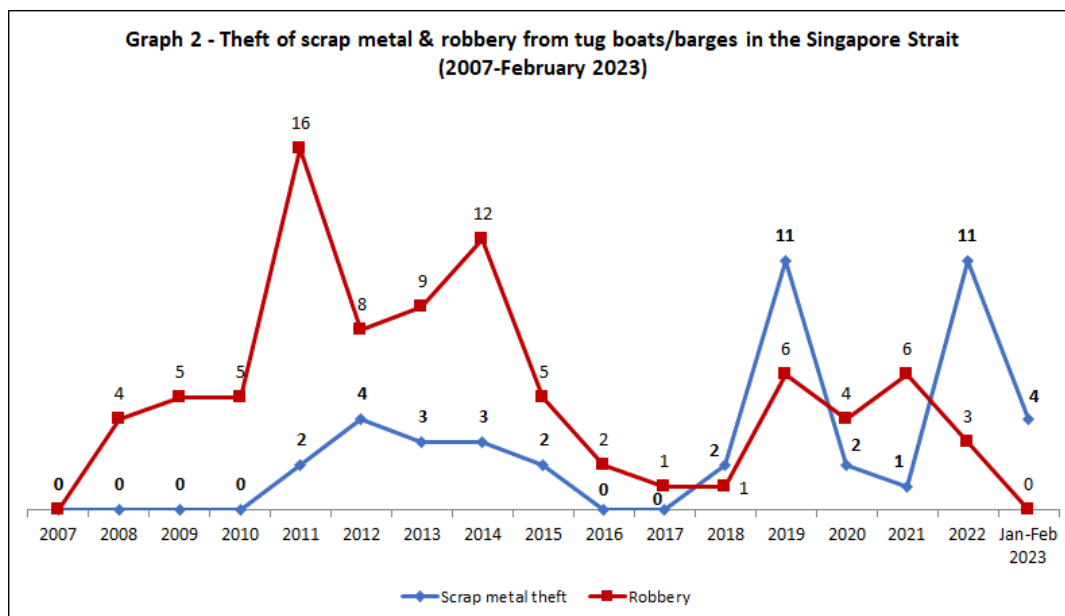
3. There were three main types of incidents occurred to tug boats and barges in Asia during the past 17-year period. They were: (1) hijacking of tug boats for resale, (2) theft of scrap metal from unmanned barges, and (3) robbery of crew's cash and personal belongings, and unsecured items from tug boats and barges.

4. Of the 283 incidents in Asia, **5%** (14 of 283) were **hijacking of tug boats** for resale, **17%** (47 of 283) were **theft of scrap metal from barges** and **78%** (222 of 283) were **robbery incidents**. Of the three types of incidents, hijacking of tug boats is most severe in nature with majority of incidents occurred during 2010 – 2011¹, where crew were thrown off the tug boats onto life rafts. The last hijacking incident occurred on 9 Jun 2014. Refer to **Annex B** on the number and modus operandi of the incidents involving tug boats and barges in Asia during the 17-year period.

Incidents involving tug boats and barges in the Singapore Strait during 2007-2022 & Jan-Feb 2023

Total number and type of incidents

5. Of the 132 incidents in the Singapore Strait, **34%** (45 of 132) were **theft of scrap metal** from barges and **66%** (87 of 132) were **robbery incidents**. There was **no hijacking of tug boats for resale in the SS**. Graph 2 shows the number of theft of scrap metal and robbery incidents involving tug boats and barges in the SS during the 17-year period. The Centre notes that majority of the incidents reported during 2008 - 2010 were robbery incidents, while the **theft of scrap metal** from barges, was **first reported in 2011**. The highest number of incidents of theft of scrap metal occurred in 2019 and 2022, with 11 incidents reported in each of the two years.



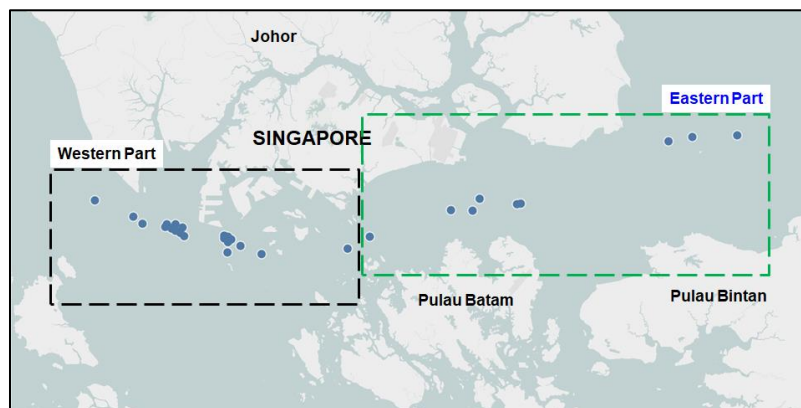
¹ Of the 14 incidents, one incident occurred in each of 2007, 2008 and 2009; three incidents in 2010, four incidents in 2011, two incidents in 2012; and one incident in each of 2013 and 2014.

Special Report

Incidents of theft of scrap metal from barges in the Singapore Strait (2011-2022 & January-February 2023)

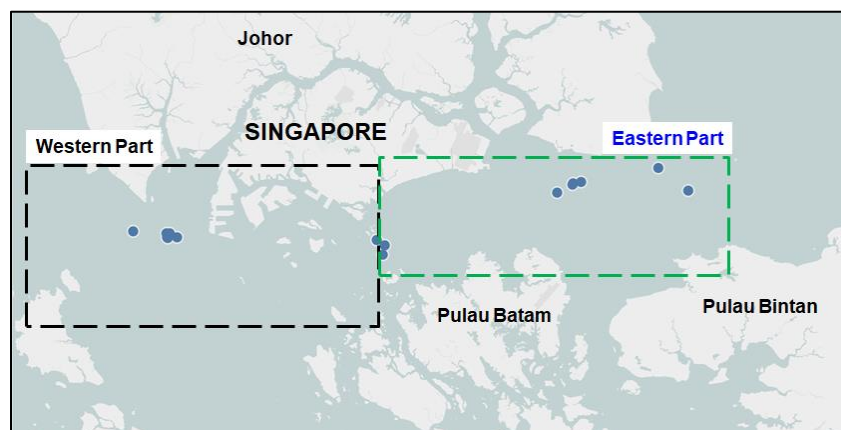
Number and location of incidents

6. 2011-2021. Of the 30 incidents of theft of scrap metal in the SS, **70%** (21 of 30) **occurred in the western part** of the Strait and **30%** (9 of 30) **in the eastern part**. The tug boats towing barges loaded with scrap metal, are slow-moving while underway in the Singapore Strait, and therefore vulnerable to boarding by perpetrators. Refer to Map 1 below on the location of the 30 incidents in SS during 2011 – 2021.



Map 1 - Location of incidents of theft of scrap metal (2011-2021)

7. 2022 & January-February 2023. A total of 11 incidents of theft of scrap metal were reported in 2022; and four incidents during January-February 2023. Map 2 below shows the location of the 15 incidents. Of the 15 incidents, **47%** (7 of 15) **incidents occurred in the western part** of the Strait and **53%** (8 of 15) **in the eastern part**.



Map 2 - Location of incidents of theft of scrap metal (2022 & Jan-Feb 2023)

Notably, more incidents of theft of scrap metal were reported in the western part of SS than the eastern part during 2011-2021; compared to 2022 & Jan-Feb 2023 where slightly more incidents occurred in the eastern part of SS than the western part.

Efforts by the Authorities of Littoral States

8. The local and regional authorities of the littoral States are concerned with the increase of sea robbery/petty theft incidents in the Singapore Strait in 2022; and have cooperated in sharing information of incidents, sighting of small boats' concentration and suspicious activities, in order to facilitate prompt responses and enhance enforcement efforts by the relevant authorities both at sea and on land; which have contributed to some operational successes. Singapore's ReCAAP Focal Point also issues regular alerts to ships passing through the Singapore Strait to remind them to be vigilant and share possible ways of doing so.

9. The ReCAAP ISC and the authorities are also engaging the shipping industry regularly through means such as the issuance of Incident Alerts, periodic reports, and conduct of drills/exercises, dialogue sessions, forums and conferences. The objectives are to highlight the areas of concern, key observations and modus operandi of the perpetrators, as well as to encourage all ships to adopt appropriate shipboard security measures, and make timely reporting of incidents to the nearest coastal State.

10. The other efforts made were as follows:

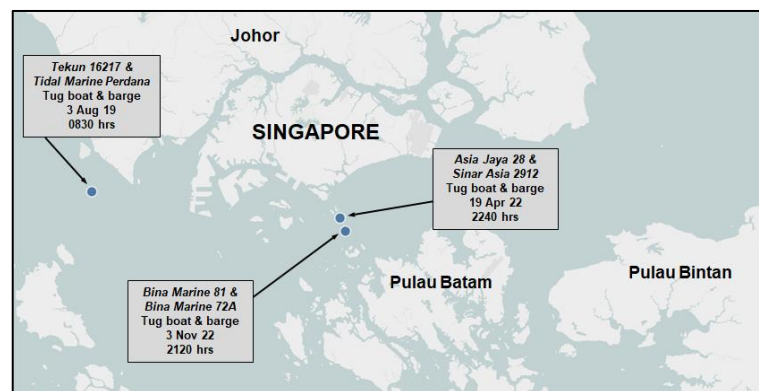
a. It was reported that in March 2022, the Indonesian Navy set up a Special Task Force to tackle the high number of incidents in the Singapore Strait (off Batam and Bintan areas).

b. On 17 Mar 23, the Indonesian Navy (TNI-AL) and Republic of Singapore Navy (RSN) co-officiated the opening ceremony for the Coordinated Patrol Indonesia-Singapore (CORPAT INDOSIN). Under CORPAT INDOSIN, TNI-AL and RSN will conduct coordinated patrols and share information on other areas of maritime security to achieve common awareness and facilitate timely response. The CORPAT INDOSIN operation is a collaboration between Indonesia and Singapore as coastal States in securing the Singapore Strait and Phillip Channel shipping lanes to ensure that the strait remains safe.

Arrests of perpetrators during 2019-2022

11. There were several arrests of the perpetrators by the authorities during 2019-2022. Notably, the arrests occurred to incidents that was reported in the western part of SS. This could explain the increase of incidents in the eastern part during 2022 and Jan-Feb 2023. With the arrests of perpetrators in one part of the SS, the perpetrators continued to board barges underway in other parts of the Strait to avoid arrest, and while surveillance and patrols were lesser. The arrests of perpetrators were made by the authorities of:

a. Malaysia. On 3 Aug 19, the MMEA arrested three perpetrators suspected to be part of the criminal groups involved in the theft of scrap metal. The initial investigation revealed that the men committed the crime in groups.



Map 3 - Location of arrests

b. Singapore. On 19 Apr 22 at about 2240 hrs, tug boat, *Asia Jaya 28*, towing barge, *Sinar Asia 2912* were underway at approximately 0.7 nm south of Kusu Island (Singapore), when the master of the tug boat reported to Singapore Vessel Traffic Information System (VTIS) that two unauthorised personnel were sighted escaping from the barge. The Singapore Police Coast Guard patrol resources responded and intercepted a suspicious sampan (type of boat). Six men were found on board the barge and another two found hiding on board. Investigations revealed that a crew member of the tug boat had allegedly conspired with the perpetrators to steal scrap metal from the barge. All nine men were arrested and charged in the State Court of Singapore.

c. Indonesia. On 3 Nov 22 at about 2120 hrs, the master of tug boat, *Bina Marine 81* towing a flat top cargo barge, *Bina Marine 72A* was informed by POLCOM, through Singapore VTIS that four small wooden boats were sighted alongside the barge. A search was conducted by the crew and the master confirmed the sighting with Singapore VTIS. Batam VTIS contacted the master, and Indonesian Police Coast Guard were deployed to assist. One wooden boat carrying two perpetrators were apprehended when the Indonesian Police Coast Guard arrived at the scene. No item was reported stolen, and all crew was safe.

Insights of the incidents in Singapore Strait (2011-2022 & Jan-Feb 2023)

12. Insights of the 45 incidents of theft of scrap metal in the SS are as follows:

- a. Number of perpetrators. 31% (14 of 45) incidents have no information on the number of perpetrators who boarded the ships. The contributing factor to the absence of information was because perpetrators boarded the barge from behind the tug boat which was out of the sight of the crew in the tug boat. Notably, for incidents where boardings were sighted; eight incidents involved 4-6 men, four incidents involved 7-9 men and **11 incidents involved more than 9 men.**
- b. Type of weapons carried. Of the 45 incidents, 93% (42 of 45) had **no information whether the perpetrators were armed;** and three incidents reported that the perpetrators were **not armed.**
- c. Treatment of crew. There is **no 'physical encounter or contact'** between the crew and the perpetrators as the crew was in the tug boats and the perpetrators boarded the unmanned barges. The crew was safe in all 45 incidents.
- d. Time of incidents. Of the 45 incidents, **64%** (29 of 45) occurred during **daylight hours** (between 0700 and 1759 hrs) and **36%** (16 of 45) during **hours of darkness** (between 1800 hrs and 0559 hrs). Most of the incidents that occurred during daylight hours occurred during **1300-1400 hrs.** As the barge was not manned, the perpetrators were bold in committing theft during daylight hours which also provides them better visibility in transferring the scrap metal from the barge to their boats that go alongside the barge. The law enforcement agencies during the patrols had sighted the robbery, and alerted the master of the tug boat, and notified the relevant littoral State of the incident. This resulted in the arrest of the perpetrators on 3 Nov 22.
- e. Flag of ships. Of the 45 incidents, 29 were Malaysia-registered tug boats, 14 were Singapore-registered tug boats, one was a Belize-registered tug boat, and one had no information on the flag of the ship. There is no evidence to indicate that certain flag ships were targeted by the perpetrators. The perpetrators are opportunistic in nature and board ships with crew who low in vigilance, ships that are slow moving and of low freeboard.

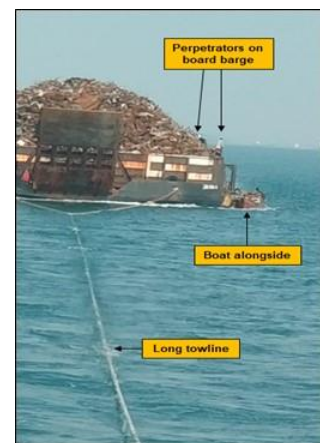
Special Report

f. Economic loss. In all 45 incidents, the perpetrators were successful in stealing scrap metal from the unmanned barges. The increase in incidents of theft of scrap metal could indicate that there was demand for scrap metal in the underground market. A check on the resale value of scrap metal seems lucrative² enough for the perpetrators to carry out the illegal crime of robbery on unmanned barges carrying scrap metal.

Refer to **Annex C** on the detailed insights of the 45 incidents.

Modus operandi of the perpetrators

13. The barge is usually loaded with a huge heap of the scrap metal and towed by a long towline (see photograph on right). Due to the heavy load on the barge, the tug boat and barge are moving at slow speed. In most incidents, the perpetrators came alongside the unmanned barge in small boats and transferred the scrap metal into the boats. The boats after fully loaded with the scrap metal would sail away, and others go alongside for further loading.



Photograph courtesy of ship owner

Recommendations to the tug boat industry

14. Prior to entering the SS and other areas of concern, ship masters are to conduct voyage risk assessment, prepare emergency communication plan, and adopt preventive measures taking reference from the '*Regional Guide 2 to Counter Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia*'.

15. While transiting these areas, the ship master and crew are advised to adopt the following measures:

- Keep abreast of the latest situation (at www.recaap.org), particularly the areas of concern. The ReCAAP ISC's reports indicate detailed locations of incidents with latitude and longitude.
- Tune-in to advisories and navigational broadcasts announced by the authorities.

² The price of scrap metal may vary over time and in different locations. From the website at <http://www.scrapmetal.sg/>, the price for scrap metal in Singapore ranges between S\$450 to S\$500 per ton, depending on its type.

Special Report



- Maximise vigilance, lookouts for suspicious boats and increase watch keeping.
- Sound alarm on sighting suspicious boats in the close vicinity of the ship or barge or suspicious individuals on board the ship or barge.
- Maintain communication with shipping company by providing periodic updates and establish daily communication checks.
- Report all incidents, suspicious activities and presence of suspicious boats in the vicinity to the nearest coastal State and flag State.

16. Feedback from some tug boat companies on the measures they adopt to prevent boarding by the perpetrators onto the tug boats and barges are as follows:

- Shorten the tow line between the tug boat and barge while maintaining a safe distance.
- Satellite tracking of the tug boat.
- Ensure that the AIS on tug boat is switched ON.
- Use night vision binoculars during hours of darkness to facilitate checking the barge and the surroundings.
- **Secure loose items** on the barge to prevent the perpetrators from taking them away easily. This can be done by **using canvas sheets or net** secured on the barge.

Recommendations to Authorities

17. The ReCAAP ISC urges the relevant littoral States to step up surveillance, increase patrols and respond promptly to all incidents. The presence of law enforcement agencies in the area serves as deterrence to perpetrators, and enable the authorities to provide timely information of the presence of suspicious small boats and perpetrators near the barge to the crew of tug boat who is not always aware of what is happening on the towed barge. As demonstrated in one of the incidents, the information by the authorities to the ship master enabled him to raise alarm which led to the escape of the perpetrators.

Special Report



18. Enhanced cooperation and coordination among the littoral States in information sharing and operational responses is required to address the increase in the number of incidents in the Singapore Strait. The ReCAAP ISC and Focal Points will continue to provide timely and accurate updates and assessment of the situation.

Way Forward

19. Collective efforts and shared responsibility of all the stakeholders, both at sea and on land are required to reverse the upward trend of incidents in the SS to ensure the safety of seafarers and safe navigation of ships while underway in the SS. In the long term, technical suggestions of barges be constructed with enhanced capabilities catering for minimum crew accommodation, safety standards, communication equipment and hold cover can be considered, in addition to the recommendations made in paragraphs 14 to 18, to reduce the number of incidents of theft/robbery on board tug boats and barges.

Enclosures:

Annex A: Location of incidents involving tug boats towing barges in Asia (2007-2022 & January-February 2023)

Annex B: Number and modus operandi of incidents involving tug boats and barges in Asia (2007- 2022 & January-February 2023)

Annex C: Insights of incidents of theft of scrap metal (2011- 2022 & January-February 2023)

Annex A

Location of incidents involving tug boats towing barges in Asia (2007-2022 & January-February 2023)

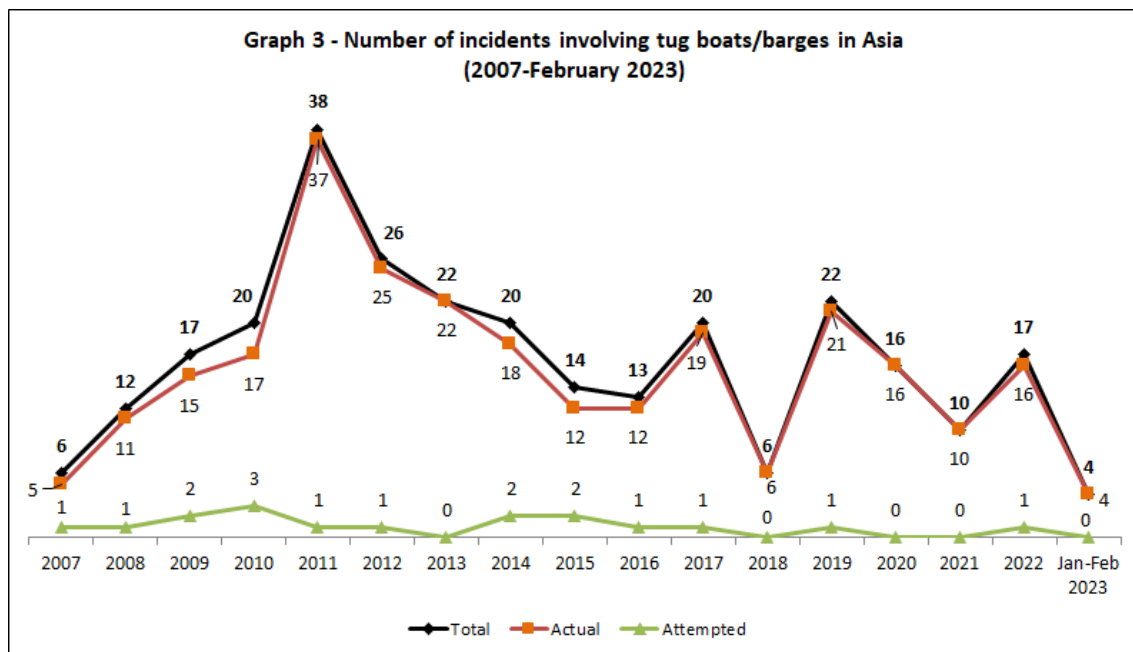
Country	Total
Straits of Malacca & Singapore	137
Indonesia	36
Malaysia	30
South China Sea	28
India	15
Bangladesh	12
Bay of Bengal	6
Philippines	6
Sulu-Celebes Sea (Philippines)	4
Sulu-Celebes Sea (Malaysia)	2
Singapore	2
Vietnam	2
Arabian Sea	1
China	1
Indian Ocean	1
Grand Total	283

Annex B

Number and modus operandi of incidents involving tug boats and barges in Asia (2007-2022 & January - February 2023)

Number of incidents

- Between 2007 and February 2023, a total of **283** incidents on board tug boats and barges in Asia were reported to the ReCAAP ISC. The number of incidents was at its peak in 2011 when a total of 38 incidents were reported. The number of incidents subsequently decreased from 38 incidents in 2011 to 13 incidents in 2016. It increased to 20 incidents in 2017 and since then, the number of incidents on board tug boats and barges in Asia had fluctuated between six incidents (2018) and 22 incidents (2019).
- Of the 283 incidents, 132 incidents occurred in the SS. This accounts for 47% of the total number of incidents involving tug boats/barges. All four incidents reported during January-February 2023 occurred in the SS.



Modus operandi of incidents involving tug boats and barges in Asia (2007-2022 & January-February 2023)

There are three main types of incidents involving tug boats and barges: (1) hijacking of tug boats for resale, (2) theft of scrap metal from barges and (3) robbery on tug boats and barges. The modus operandi of each of these incidents is tabulated below.

Factors	Hijack (14 incidents)	Theft of scrap metal (47 incidents)	Robbery (222 incidents)
No. of perpetrators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 4 to 6 men (14%) ▪ 7 to 9 men (22%) ▪ > 9 men (50%) ▪ Unknown (14%) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 1 to 3 men (19%) ▪ 4 to 6 men (19%) ▪ 7 to 9 men (9%) ▪ > 9 men (23%) ▪ Unknown (30%) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 1 to 3 men (18%) ▪ 4 to 6 men (31%) ▪ 7 to 9 men (12%) ▪ > 9 men (11%) ▪ Unknown (28%)
Type of weapons	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ More sophisticated weapons (7%) ▪ Guns & knives (43%) ▪ Knives/machetes/others only (29%) ▪ Not stated (21%) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Not armed (9%) ▪ Not stated (91%) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ More sophisticated weapons (1%) ▪ Guns & knives (13%) ▪ Knives/machetes/others only (31%) ▪ Not armed (6%) ▪ Not stated (49%)
Treatment of crew	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Kidnapped (7%) ▪ Crew discarded (57%) ▪ Taken hostage (29%) ▪ No injuries (7%) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ No injuries (96%) ▪ Not stated (4%) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Missing (2%) ▪ Kidnapped (5%) ▪ Seriously injured (0%) ▪ Assaulted (5%) ▪ Taken hostage (10%) ▪ Threatened (3%) ▪ No injuries (60%) ▪ Not stated (15%)
Economic losses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Hijack of ship 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Theft of scrap metal 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Cargo discharged (4%) ▪ Cash/personal belongings (32%) ▪ Ship property/stores (28%) ▪ Engine spares (2%) ▪ Unsecured items (6%) ▪ Nothing stolen (20%) ▪ Not stated (8%)
Time of incident	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Daylight hours (21%) ▪ Hours of darkness (79%) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Daylight hours (66%) ▪ Hours of darkness (34%) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Daylight hours (25%) ▪ Hours of darkness (75%)

Insights of incidents of theft of scrap metal (2011- 2022 & January-February 2023)

1. The insights of the 45 incidents of theft of scrap metal in the Singapore Strait as follows:

a. Number of perpetrators. 31% (14 of 45) incidents have no information on the number of perpetrators who boarded the ships. The contributing factor to the absence of information was due to perpetrators who boarded the barge from behind the tug boat. Of the 45 incidents, eight incidents involved groups of 1-3 men, eight incidents involved 4-6 men, four incidents involved 7-9 men, **11 incidents involved more than 9 men**, and 14 incidents had no information on the number of perpetrators.

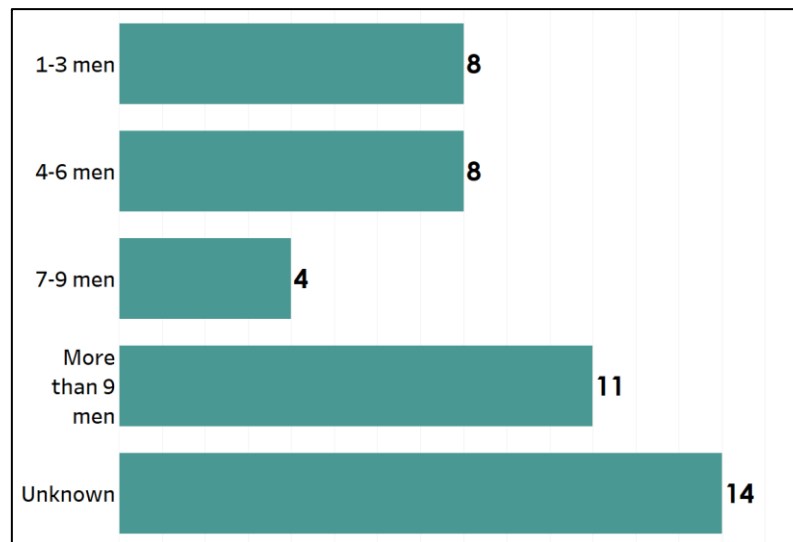


Chart 1 – Number of perpetrators - Scrap metal theft in SS (2011- 2022 & Jan-Feb 2023)

b. Type of weapons carried. Of the 45 incidents, 42 incidents (93%) had **no information whether the perpetrators were armed**; and three incidents reported that the perpetrators were **not armed**.



Chart 2 – Type of weapons carried - Scrap metal theft in SS (2011- 2022 & Jan-Feb 2023)

Special Report

c. Treatment of crew. There is **no 'physical encounter or contact'** between the crew and the perpetrators as the crew was in the tug boats and the perpetrators were on the barges. The crew was safe in all 45 incidents.

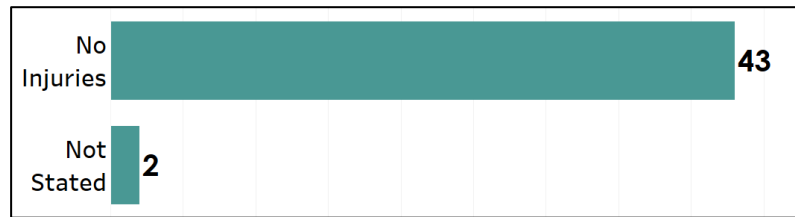


Chart 3 – Treatment of crew - Scrap metal theft in SS (2011- 2022 & Jan-Feb 2023)

d. Time of incidents. Of the 45 incidents, **29 incidents** (64%) occurred during **daylight hours** (between 0700 and 1759 hrs) and **16 incidents** (36%) during **hours of darkness** (between 1800 hrs and 0559 hrs). Most of the incidents occurred during daylight hours from 1100-1800 hrs, with the highest boarding occurred during **1300-1400 hrs**. As the barge was not manned, the perpetrators were rather bold in carrying out the theft during daylight hours.

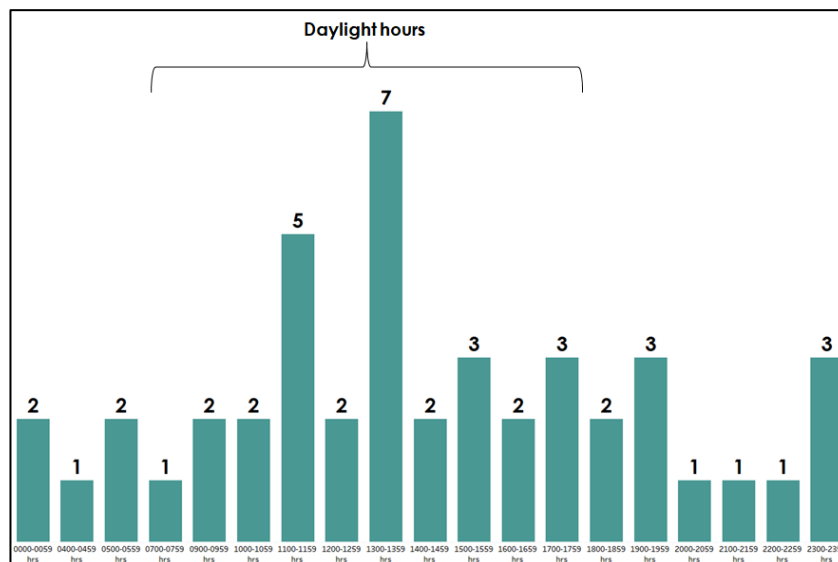


Chart 4 – Time of incidents - Scrap metal theft in SS (2011- 2022 & Jan-Feb 2023)

e. Flag of ships. Of the 45 incidents, 29 were Malaysia-registered tug boats, 14 were Singapore-registered tug boats, one was a Belize-registered tug boat, and one had no information on the flag of the ship. There is no evidence to indicate that certain flag ships were targeted by the perpetrators. The perpetrators are opportunistic in nature and board ships with crew who low in vigilance, ships that are slow moving and of low freeboard.

f. Economic loss. In all 45 incidents, the perpetrators were successful in stealing scrap metal from the unmanned barges. The increase in incidents of theft of scrap metal suggests that there is a demand for scrap metal in the underground 'black market' for the perpetrators to dispose of for a lucrative profit.