



*Safe and Secure Seas for All*

## **SPOT COMMENTARY 1/17**

*Kidnapping, Harassment and Suspicious Activities in  
Waters off East Sabah and Southern Philippines*

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## Purpose

1. This Spot Commentary 1/17 aims to provide an update to the maritime security situation in the waters off East Sabah and Southern Philippines, in particular, the Sibutu Passage. It complements IFC Spot Commentary 2/16. Included within are relevant information and a broad assessment of the state of maritime security in that specific area which will be useful to the maritime community for shaping its security operations and risk-control measures while operating there.

## Assessment

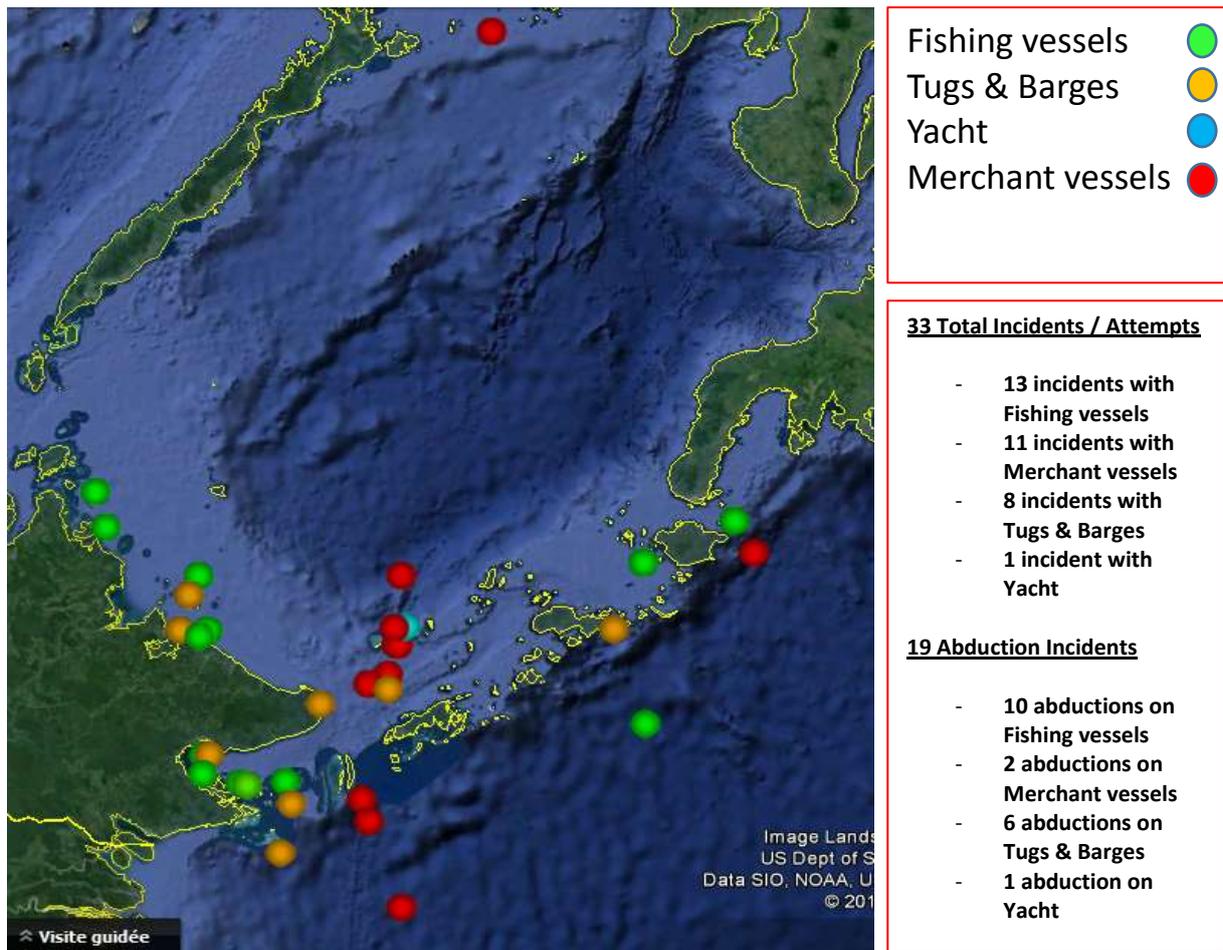
2. The Information Fusion Centre (IFC) assesses that the threat to merchant shipping, primarily towards fishing vessels, tugboats and low-freeboard vessels, from the risk of kidnapping and harassment by criminal / terrorist elements (notably the Abu Sayaaf Group or ASG) in the Sibutu Passage prevails. Based on observed traffic levels and maritime patterns-of-life in the affected area, it is assessed that this threat to large merchant vessels with higher freeboard; whom implement hardening procedures; and conduct evasive manoeuvres, is **LOW**.

## Observed Activity

3. There were 33 incidents observed in the vicinity of the Sibutu passage over the last 12 months. Figure 1 below shows these incidents broken down by month. Of these 33 incidents, 19 involved abductions and 2 concerned larger merchant vessels.



*Figure 1: Abduction / Harassment incidents per month - 2016*



*Figure 2: Diagram of location of incidents*

## Modus Operandi

4. In the months before Nov 2016, the typical modus operandi observed of the perpetrators was that they favoured the option of taking hostages from low and slow vessels such as tugboats and fishing vessels. The IFC notes that this changed on 20 Oct 16, in that it was observed that attempts were made on larger and faster vessels with higher freeboards, including large merchant vessels. While there have been reports on two occasions, of the perpetrators firing upon merchant vessels with small-arms fire, this has been sporadic and would appear to be an attempt to intimidate ships into stopping. This may also be an indicator that the perpetrators are aiming to widen their selection of potential targets.

5. Considering the interval and proximity of the reported incidents observed thus far, it is assessed the perpetrators are likely from the same group based on the similarity of their reported *modus operandi*.

6. The Modus Operandi observed includes:
  - a. Targeted vessels:
    - i. Bulk carriers,
    - ii. Tankers,
    - iii. Heavy load carriers,
    - iv. Tugs and barges,
  - b. Perpetrators tend to:
    - i. comprise five to ten armed individuals,
    - ii. be dressed in black with face-masks,
    - iii. carry high-powered automatic rifles,
    - iv. operate in a single speedboat,
    - v. operate during daylight hours,
    - vi. fire on vessels with small-arms sporadically,
    - vii. have no observed boarding / climbing equipment.

7. While these incidents are indeed serious, it is important that mariners note that the probability of experiencing an incident in this area remains low. It is assessed from AIS tracks that approximately 35 merchant vessels pass through the Sibutu Passage per day. To place this in perspective, based on the last two-months where incident-numbers were highest (Nov-Dec 16), it is calculated that the prospect of encountering an incident is ~0.7%.

8. It is important to note that in the case where vessels have conducted evasive manoeuvres and implemented ship hardening, there have been no observed successful abduction or boarding attempts.

### **IFC Recommendations**

9. Noting the above, the IFC recommends the following measures be implemented while transiting in the affected area off the Sibutu Passage, to mitigate the prevailing threat to as low a probability as possible:

- a. Maintaining good communications via VHF Channels 08 and 16 with littoral law enforcement agencies and the IFC. A map and contact details of the relevant local authorities is attached at Annex A.
- b. Activate ship's Automatic Identification System (AIS).
- c. Increase vigilance in watch-keeping and deploy additional lookouts.
- d. Use CCTV cameras for coverage of vulnerable areas (if available).

- e. Keep ship's whistle and fog horn ready for immediate use.
- f. Secure or lift external ladders to prevent their use and to restrict external access to the bridge.
- g. Deploy Self-Protection Measures (SPM) eg. Rig the water spray hoses and foam monitors in a fixed position. Evasive manoeuvres have also been proven to deter perpetrators in the reported incidents in this specific area.
- h. Firmly secure all doors and hatches providing access to the accommodation and machinery spaces.
- i. Consider restricting personnel access to upper decks and bridge wings during Sibutu Passage transits, so as to not present a target for potential small-arms fire. All non-essential personnel should be located in a secure part of the ship where practicable.

## Annex A to IFC Spot Commentary 1/17



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