

By Daniel Falkiner

On 3rd March 2010, the Singapore Navy issued an unprecedented advisory announcing that it had "received indication" that an unnamed terrorist group was planning attacks on vessels, specifically tankers, transiting the Malacca Strait.

Similar warnings have been issued from other quarters in the past but, thankfully, they have so far come to nothing. Given the steadfast reputation of the Singapore Navy, however, should we take its advisory with a pinch less salt? Just how credible is the threat of maritime terrorism in the Strait of Malacca?

Sam Bateman, a former Australian naval officer and Senior Fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies in Singapore, makes a good case that advisories such as this one should be kept firmly in perspective; if they are not, he says, resources will be wasted, unnecessary disruption will be caused and more credible scenarios will be overlooked.

Bateman convincingly argues that the most frightening scenario, namely the sinking of a large vessel in the Strait to cause traffic chaos, is hardly credible. Even at its most narrow point, the Strait is almost two miles wide; more than one large ship would have to be sunk in order to block the Strait successfully, and even in this case competent traffic management could significantly alleviate the problem. Other serious problems faced by potential maritime terrorists who had hijacked a tanker with the intention of using it as a 'floating bomb' would be navigating the ship into a position where it could inflict maximum damage or casualties and, should they manage this, actually exploding the ship; modern tankers and LPG carriers have inbuilt safety features and are very sturdy.

Bateman rightly concludes that the most likely possibility is suicide attacks in small craft, such as those carried out by al-Qa'eda against the Limburg and the USS Cole. However, he seems to doubt the likelihood even of this possibility: "The Limburg and Cole attacks both occurred in relatively insecure waters. An attack would be harder in waters where terrorists may have difficulty in finding a secure launching area for the attack."

In theory, Bateman is correct: ETA terrorists would have a much harder time launching a maritime terrorist attack, should they ever wish to, off the coast of Spain than would al-Shabaab off Somalia. In practice, however, his assessment ignores the instability of the region and the capabilities and intentions of terrorist organisations based therein.

Very real and worrying possibilities for the development of maritime terrorism lie in the hills and along the beaches of the unstable Indonesian province of Aceh. Aceh is larger than Switzerland and it has several hundred kilometres of coastline facing the Malacca Strait. Before the peace agreement signed between separatist rebels and the Indonesian government in 2005, the province had known only civil war for almost thirty years. It is considered to have been the first

geographical foothold for Islam in South East Asia and its people remain religiously very conservative. Indeed, the devastating 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami that left hundreds of thousands dead and even more homeless was considered by many Acehnese to be a punishment from God; this perception contributed to a rise in religiosity in the province, most visibly in the increasing implementation of Shar'iah law by local religious policemen.

Despite the 2005 peace agreement, violence has returned to Aceh. On 22nd February 2010, Indonesian police raided a camp in the province's highlands that belonged to an offshoot of Jemaah Islamiah (JI). Over 30 militants have since been arrested and Dulmatin, a senior JI bomb-maker and Indonesia's most wanted terrorist, was killed during a raid in Jakarta on 9th March. A few days later, Indonesian National Police Chief Bambang Hendarso Danuri announced that the raids in Aceh had provided the clues to Dulmatin's whereabouts.

This is good news for Indonesia's anti-terror squads and for peace and prosperity in general. The haul of militants and the killing of Dulmatin would also have proved a welcome opportunity for the Indonesian government to display its military and crime-fighting colours to the US President Obama a few weeks before his planned arrival in the country. (Although in the event the visit was postponed to pass the US Healthcare Bill)

Bad news for the Indonesians would have been the discovery in Aceh of JI or al-Qa'eda plans to target shipping in the Strait; the existence of domestic terror plots are a headache for any government, especially when the head of a major donor is about to arrive. However, handing such intelligence over to Singapore to announce would have allowed the Indonesian government to alert potential targets of any plot to the danger whilst avoiding any potential embarrassment before Obama's planned visit. The fact that the Singapore Navy advisory contains no reference to JI, which is based principally in Indonesia and is the only terrorist organisation in the area capable of carrying out such an operation, supports this hypothesis. Singapore made sure that nobody is explicitly implicated in the plot.

Some might dispute this argument. A Thai naval attaché reported that the warning originated in Japan, and Police Chief Danuri "effectively ruled out" any connection between the captured Aceh militants and Singapore's advisory. Both claims are nonetheless debateable. That intelligence of this sort would reach Japan before Singapore or the other littoral states is unlikely, and the unnamed terrorist organisation mentioned in Singapore's advisory fits the geographic and ideological profile of the JI militants in Aceh perfectly. Many of the suspects detained by the Indonesian police are native Acehnese, and some are from Riau province. JI, like the unnamed terrorist organisation, certainly wants to prove that it is "still a viable organisation." And Downstream Today reports from Singapore that a regional intelligence official stated, on condition of anonymity, that the information behind the advisory was "recently acquired" after the detention of militants "elsewhere in South East Asia." The linearity of the February raids, subsequent police interrogations and the issuing of the advisory seems very solid.

If it is indeed the case that the Indonesian and Singapore governments have colluded in issuing this advisory (not unreasonable given their close cooperation, along with Malaysia, in fighting the Straits' piracy problems in recent years), and that the intelligence behind it stems from the

recent raids on militants in Aceh (which also led to Dulmatin), we have good reason to be concerned. Like the other littoral states, Singapore was shocked and alarmed by the 2005 Joint War Council designation of the Malacca Strait as a "war-zone"; it has no interest whatsoever in artificially inflating the level of threat in the region.

Despite the fact that JI is on the defensive at present, with many members on the run, a devastating attack would require only a small number of operatives and a modest amount of explosives. In the case of the Cole and Limburg bombings, for example, it is thought that only two suicide bombers were necessary to complete each mission, and the Cole bombing used around only a third to one half of the explosive material detonated by JI in the 2002 Bali attack. The link of the militants in Aceh to Dulmatin means that they had access to sophisticated bomb-making expertise, if not explosive material.

Any terrorist assault on a tanker, even if the damage caused was less than that inflicted on the Limburg, would have serious economic consequences. After the Limburg bombing, shipping in the Gulf of Aden temporarily collapsed and Yemen, a relatively minor maritime player, lost \$3.8 million per month in lost port revenues. Singapore, on the other hand, is the linchpin of the Asian maritime trading system and would stand to lose much more. Furthermore, significantly heightened insurance premiums for vessels transiting the Strait (around 50,000 per year) together with the rising price of crude and the fragile state of the world economy would be a toxic mix. Al-Qa'eda and its affiliates know this well; Osama bin Laden has frequently called for attacks on Western energy installations and on March 7 2010, Adam Gadahn, al-Qa'eda's US-born spokesman, renewed the call via an online video urging jihadists to "further undermine the West's already struggling economy" through attacks "which will shake consumer confidence and stifle spending."

The shipping industry is already on high alert and the Strait's navies have stepped up their patrols. A catastrophic attack may not be imminent but it is certainly possible, and the resurfacing of militancy in Aceh, and radical Islamist militancy at that, is alarming in any case. The relative instability of the province provides a safe-haven from which militants would have little difficulty equipping and launching a vessel manned by suicide terrorists and Indonesian police squads sweeping Aceh state that local support for the militants is not insignificant. As David Kilcullen in *The Accidental Guerrilla* brilliantly points out, al-Qa'eda has a knack at infiltrating war-torn and poverty-stricken societies and hijacking their grievances to support the wider Salafist cause. We should, therefore, keep a close eye on Aceh, and do what we can to help Indonesia nip JI's resurgence in the province swiftly in the bud.