

Theft rather than piracy becoming a problem in Singapore strait

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Though global piracy has fallen to its lowest level in three decades, robbery remained a problem in the waters of the Singapore Strait.

Recently seven criminals were caught in the act of stealing scrap metal from a barge towed by the tug Bina Marine 81, according to the Riau Islands Police. A spokesman for the department said that 1.8 tonnes of scrap were recovered from four small launches, which the thieves used to board the tow at night.

The theft was initially spotted by Singaporean authorities on radar. Using an information-sharing agreement, they passed the tip-off to police in the Riau Islands for interdiction.

All seven suspects were Batam residents who were aged from 19 to 46. They face charges of theft under Indonesia's criminal code.

There has been an uptick in boardings and robberies in the Singapore Strait over the to date, according to Singapore's Information Fusion Centre (ReCAAP ISC). From January to September, the agency recorded 10 reports of robbery involving tugs and barges in the strait, a higher level than had been seen in the past two years.

ReCAAP ISC believed that this reflected a rebound in tug and tow traffic after the end of the pandemic. Tug and tow operations were frequently targeted because of their slow speed and low freeboard.

The gangs generally approach tugs and barges in small wooden boats, operating in groups of 7-to-10 individuals.

ReCAAP ISC advised tug operators to convoy with other vessels where possible, use searchlights at night and modify barges to make them less vulnerable to boarding.

Four new incidents reported on November 8th since its previous update on October 5th. Three occurred in Phillip Channel, and one occurred in the Eastbound Lane of

the Traffic Separation Scheme (TSS), within the Singapore Strait. The perpetrators were unarmed in all cases.

Two of the incidents (16th and 17th October) occurred within two hours and one mile of each other, both with three perpetrators.

The perpetrators avoid confrontation and usually flee when challenged.