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Vessel owners did not heed guidelines

# Fishing for trouble: Esscom

LAHAD DATU: Abductions like those committed by cross border criminals in Sabah waters happened to vessels that ignored prevention guidelines issued by security authorities.

A briefing here was told that the common denominator of all the cases was the fact that the vessels did not communicate their voyages and navigation plans to the authorities.

Eight abductions occurred so far this year and they involved barges and fishing boats near the maritime border with the Philippines.

“Crime takes place because of the opportunities for it to be committed,” said the commander of the Eastern Sabah Security Command DCP Dato Wan Abdul Bari Wan Abdul Khalid.

“We, meaning the security forces and the public, the fishermen, the fishing boat or barge owners, must play our respective role in order to make it less easy for crimes to be committed.”

He was addressing questions from among participants in a briefing for investors of the palm oil industrial cluster (POIC Lahad Datu) here.

POIC Sabah Sdn Bhd, developer of POIC Lahad Datu, initiated the briefing in response to concerns among its investors over recent border abductions off the east coast of Sabah.

Also present were Lynette Hoo, Deputy CEO of POIC Sabah Sdn Bhd, Brigadier General Hamdan Ismail the Deputy Commander of Esscom, SAC Dato’ Ahamad Zufami Mohd Ghazali the Chief of Staff Intelligence Esscom, ACP Hassim Justin the Assistant Chief of Staff Intelligence Esscom, Lahad Datu OCPD Hamzah Hj. Ahmad and Lahad Datu District Officer Iman Ali.

The Esscom chief said copies of the handbook on precautions and what to do in an emergency are available with the Marine Department.

“Generally we need to collectively respond to the prevailing situation by adopting a culture of prevention; and that involves everyone and not just Esscom, after all anyone who guarantees you against crime is probably exaggerating.”

On why some barges and fishing vessels did not reveal their voyage plans, DCP Wan said it may have to do with the fact that the crew members may be illegal workers, or the vessels concerned may be involved in cross border criminal activities such as goods and human trafficking.

“Our investigation also revealed that at least two of the abducted fishing vessels had encroached into Filipino waters and were being held for royalty payment,” he said.

In his briefing, Lahad Datu-based ACP Hassim said police maintains a wide network of intelligence with sources within and outside Sabah, and such network has helped prevent 98 cases of attempted abductions or kidnap for ransom.

Police have identified the Abu Sayyaf kidnap-for-ransom group and groups loyal to the Royal Sulu Forces as Sabah’ external security threats, while internal threats comprise the illegal immigrants, smugglers and sympathisers of Islamic State.

Apart from economic opportunities, the availability of ready housing in squatter colonies in Sabah is one of the main attractions for illegal immigration into the state.

“Sabah’s security threats are the kidnap for ransom gangs and the bad hats loyal to the Royal Sulu forces, and in the middle of these two threats are the illegal immigrants,” said ACP Hassim. “It’s safe to speculate that removing the PTIs (illegal immigrants) will remove the threats.”

He therefore called on employers in Sabah to avoid being complicit by not employing any worker without proper documents.

The sentiments was echoed by Iman who said his administration has been on a crusade to rid the district of an estimated 53,000 squatters.

Iman, credited with a massive transformation of this town’s ‘garbage and

PTI’ image since he took office about two years ago, said the people must search their conscience if they themselves had contributed to the estimated 140,000 foreigners without documents.

“Ask yourself if you are hiring illegals as your domestic helper, factory worker,” Iman pleaded. “Don’t always blame the authorities.”

About 30 officials representing POIC investors attended the briefing which has been a frequent activity here since the Feb 2013 invasion of a village here by Royal Sulu loyalist soldiers. A series of post-invasion abduction-for-ransom aggravated the perception that this town is under threat.

Esscom was set up as a result of the invasion. Close to RM1 billion in military assets have been added to the east coast region called Eastern Sabah Security Zone (ESSZone) which covers about half the land mass of Sabah and 1,773km of coastline.

Located within ESSZone are 361 islands and a wide expanse of the Sulu and Celebes Sea which is home to about 6,000 fishing boats of various sizes if which only about 2,000 are licensed.

Adding to the logistics challenges is the need to police the flow to Sabah of the inhabitants of Filipino island of Sitangkai and Sibutu (pop:60,000) and Jolo (pop:850,000) where crime and drugs reign, said Wan Abdul Bari.