

Gov't sends troops to protect ships in Gulf of Aden
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Malaysia has sent crack troops and navy ships to the Gulf of Aden after two of its vessels were seized by pirates last month, according to reports today.

The comments by deputy premier Najib Abdul Razak come after the country's shipping giant MISC Berhad said Tuesday it had barred its vessels from the area, where two of its tankers were hijacked by armed pirates in August.

The area has seen a spate of attacks in recent weeks, with eight ships taken by pirates since the end of July.

"Our primary concern is the safety of our sailors," Najib was quoted as saying by the Star newspaper.

Malaysia's armed forces chief said the military had sent two warships to the Gulf of Aden last Saturday to monitor the situation, the Star reported.

Najib told the paper that negotiations between the pirates and representatives from MISC had not progressed much, with troops and naval vessels sent to protect another four of MISC's ships in the area.

The Bunga Melati 5 with 41 crew - 36 Malaysians and five from the Philippines - was seized last Friday off the coast of Yemen carrying 30,000 metric tonnes of petrochemicals.

Ten days earlier, the palm oil tanker Bunga Melati Dua, with 39 crew on board, was hijacked off the coast of Somalia. MISC said late Tuesday it had finally been able to regain radio contact with the Bunga Melati 5.

Malaysia's foreign ministry has set up a special unit to monitor the situation while appealing to authorities in both Yemen and Somalia to ensure the crew's release, state news agency Bernama reported.

It said the pirates had reportedly demanded a ransom of three million dollars for the return of the two ships and crew.