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Smuggling 'more serious threat' in straits, says PM

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LANGKAWI: While Malaysia acknowledges the possibility of terrorism in the Straits of Malacca, its priority remains in other maritime criminal activities.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi said yesterday maritime threats such as smuggling and illegal migration were more substantial than any perceived potential terrorism.

"Therefore, measures taken must commensurate with the threat. Equally important is that the proportionate response to meet the security challenge must take into account sensitivities such as national sovereignty.

"Therefore, a holistic and collective approach will be critical to managing these challenges."

Abdullah said it was not realistic to expect the straits to be free of maritime criminal threats. The threat of crime, he said, would continue to exist, but opportunities that fostered the threat could be removed.

"I believe that much can be done to remove or reduce the opportunity for maritime crime. This, however, cannot be left alone to any individual state or the littoral states (Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore).

"All stakeholders will need to contribute to the positive outcome of the safety and se-



curity equation," he said in the keynote address at the opening of the International Maritime Conference at the Langkawi International Maritime and Aerospace exhibition.

His address was delivered by Defence Ministry secretary-general Datuk Abu Bakar Abdullah.

Abdullah said the fear of the straits being used for terrorist activities, or its shipping being targeted by terrorists, had grown after the Sept 11, 2001, attacks in the United States.

Additionally, he said, although piracy or armed robbery at sea did not pose a significant threat to the state system, there was a possibility that pirate activities might become the "instruments of terrorists".

"Malaysia and other coastal states acknowledge these concerns.

"The many stakeholders that comprise coastal states, user states, international maritime communities, non-governmental organisations and even robbers and criminals have differing degrees of inter-

ests in the area.

"States are confronted with different levels of risk by the impacts of these grave activities on their national interests," he said.

Assuring the international community that Malaysian waters were indeed safe, he said all three services of the armed forces, marine and air wing police as well as the Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency were prepared for any threat and were doing a good job reducing crime in the straits.

"Malaysia is hopeful that cooperation between littoral states and other stakeholders will continue and is enhanced in the area of maintaining safety of navigation and environment, while littoral states will handle the security aspect.

"Sincerity is fundamental in whatever collaborative and cooperative effort undertaken, without any underlying agenda. We are also hopeful that the safety and security issues of the straits are not manipulated by any party for its advantage.

"Since the straits is open for everyone, it is natural for us to share the burden of maintaining the security of the waterway. We welcome any monetary or technical aid to maintain and enhance safety of navigation and environment but are strongly against any involvement of foreign assets to ensure the security of the straits."