

Naval task force on heightened alert, monitoring movements in Gulf

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ABU DHABI — A Western naval task force has been on alert for an Al Qaida attack in the Gulf.

Combined Task Force 152, a 20-member coalition that patrols the Gulf, has been on heightened alert in the central and southern Gulf. The task force, based in Bahrain, has urged civilian vessels to report any suspicious activity. "A determined terrorist can create a real incident in the Gulf and the collective will [of the coalition] makes that sort of activity extremely difficult," British Royal Navy Commodore Peter Hudson, the current CTF commander, said.

CFT has launched a drive to acquire intelligence from fishing and leisure boat operators in the Gulf. Officials said these vessels, which number more than 5,000, could provide the eyes and ears necessary to prevent an insurgency strike.

"We all want to see a safe and stable trading environment and we can do that by communicating and exchanging information," Hudson told the Manama-based Gulf Daily News. "This is entirely voluntary but it could help us build up a picture of events and if we understand what is going on around the region."

CFT has not identified the heightened alert in the Gulf. In June, both Britain and the United States warned of an Al Qaida strike in the United Arab Emirates.

Officials said one scenario envisioned by CFT was that Al Qaida would send vessels to crowded Gulf ports in a repeat of the strike on the USS Cole in 2000. Seventeen U.S. sailors were killed in the Al Qaida suicide speedboat attack in the Yemeni port of Aden.

"This is an area of international economic importance and a lot of traders use it, whether from India, Pakistan or east Africa or tankers who trade with the U.S.," Hudson said. "We have a good healthy relationship with the maritime community, particularly within the fishing industry and we want to develop that."

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