

'Attacks' on ships lawful, says China

By GREG TORODE

A SENIOR United Nations shipping safety official expressed shock yesterday at reports of piracy attacks by Chinese officials but revealed that Beijing believed actions outside territorial waters were "just and lawful".

Admiral Thimio Mitropoulos, of the United Nations International Maritime Organisation (IMO), said: "If the [Hong Kong Government] reports are right, as a human being I would be shocked."

Before leaving Hong Kong to continue his East Asian piracy fact-finding mission, Admiral Mitropoulos outlined China's stron-

gest statement on the issue, received during talks in Beijing with Foreign Ministry and Customs officials this week.

To eradicate a smuggling boom as China opened up, Admiral Mitropoulos said, China wanted to get the message across that it had taken "appropriate measures involving the detention of local and foreign ships within China's territorial seas and adjacent contiguous seas".

"China attaches great importance to the maintenance of law and order and will take strong measures to suppress piracy and lawlessness.

"China does not accept

the lawful execution of law enforcement by competent Chinese authorities is unlawful," he said, in a statement which local government and shipping industry officials believe could justify fears that China is claiming the South China Sea as its own.

Admiral Mitropoulos, director of the IMO's maritime safety committee, said he could not get answers from China as to exactly what territory could be classed as "contiguous" and said they had admitted to taking action in areas "adjacent to contiguous seas".

He said China strongly denied any involvement by its navy.

Many of the 100 distress reports handed over un-abridged to the IMO by the Government this week involved attacks hundreds of kilometres from Chinese territory, some mentioning the navy.

While saying China's version of its actions could well be legal under international law, he said he was heartened by yesterday's reports that China was setting new guidelines for wayward forces.

He said he had not heard of that while in Beijing but said he welcomed anything that would make the South China Sea safer, adding: "I feel that if there has been a crime committed then the

perpetrators should be brought to justice."

The Deputy Secretary for Security, Jim Morris, said last night the statement from China issued by the admiral was a "clear advance".

"At least it's an acknowledgement that their ships are involved . . . I think that's a clear advance in itself.

"They've previously been reluctant to do that. That's got to be good."

When asked if he was concerned that it could mean the whole South China Sea, he said: "It's not for us to be expressing concern. Why should I express concern on behalf of another flag state."

SOUTH CHINA MORNING POST
18 MAR 1994