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Arrests prompt alert over ship break-ins

Jason Gagliardi

Police have warned container ship operators to be on alert for seafaring burglars after arresting 20 suspected illegal immigrants in boats equipped for boarding and robbing ships.

The marine police deputy regional commander, Spencer Foo, said thieves were sneaking over the border at night in fishing boats equipped with ropes, ladders and grappling hooks, then boarding and ransacking moored container ships and local traders' ships.

He said container ship operators who did not have vigilant watchmen were issuing an "open invitation" to be robbed.

The men arrested by marine police set sail from Lufeng, about 150 kilometres northeast of Hong Kong, in two fishing boats with hooks, ladders and axes.

One boat containing 11 men was intercepted by a marine police patrol boat just after 11.30pm on Thursday after it was seen near Kau Yi Chau, west of Hong Kong Island.

Shortly after 1am, another boat was stopped in the same

area and nine men were arrested. The men, aged between 18 and 39, were arrested for unauthorised entry into the territory and for going equipped for stealing.

"We have had a number of such arrests this year," Foo said. The last big one was about two months ago.

"They sneak into Hong Kong waters and then watch for an opportunity where a boat has been left unattended or without a watchman.

"There does not seem to be any planning or evidence of syndicated gangs."