

Armed pirates target region's high seas

By ANDY GILBERT

THE Hong Kong region is singled out for concern in an international report which details the hijacking of ships by pirates using firearms and excessive violence.

Four piracy-related incidents were reported in Hong Kong waters last year compared to none the year before – one being the sensitive Tequila cargo vessel hijacking on which the Hong Kong Government is still awaiting a report from China.

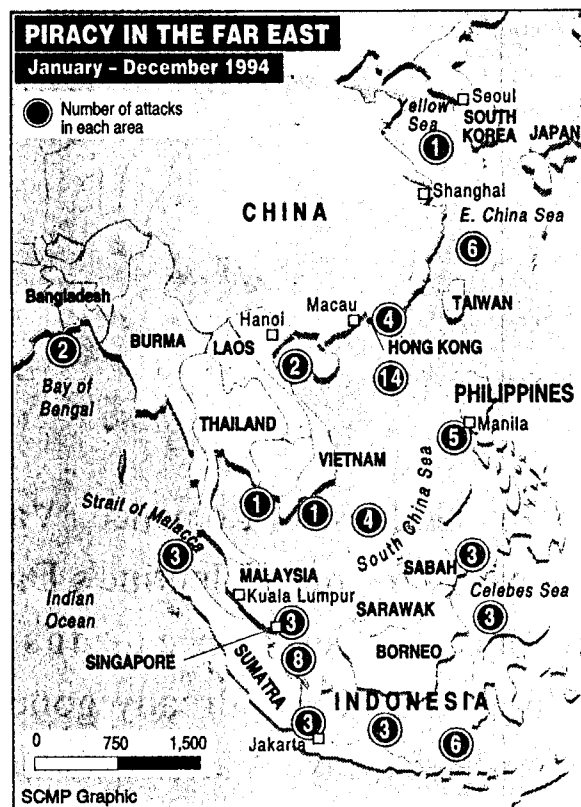
The Hong Kong-Luzon-Hainan region was picked out by the International Maritime Bureau report as an area which required continued monitoring.

There were 14 incidents of either hijacking, boarding and seizing goods, or attempted boarding – a fall of 19 from 1993 – highlighting a downward trend in overall incidents.

The incidents in Hong Kong waters included a hijacking, two boardings and one attempted boarding. Two occurred while vessels were at anchor near Lamma.

Reported piracy incidents around the world fell from 103 in 1993 to 90 last year, and from 68 to 38 in the Far East.

But the number of actual vessels boarded increased



from 28 in 1993 to 49 last year, and hijackings rose from zero to five.

"A disturbing trend has been the use of firearms and violence once the vessel has been boarded," said the re-

port by the Kuala Lumpur-based regional piracy centre.

Of all the incidents, the report picked out the Tequila incident in Hong Kong waters on March 20 last year as one of the four worst.

"The ship was boarded by five pirates while at buoy outside Hong Kong," the report said. The ship was in the Tathong Channel near Junk Bay.

"The vessel was forced to leave for Wailing Doa, where it is understood the cargo was discharged."

The Honduran-registered vessel was taking second-hand cars to Taiwan and was later traced to Zhuhai. China admitted mainlanders were responsible but denied it occurred in Hong Kong waters.

The most worrying area was pinpointed as Southeast Asia, with a rise from 15 incidents in 1993 to 33 last year.

Two Hong Kong-registered ships were also involved in incidents. The California Zeus container ship was boarded in Sri Lankan waters on May 15 and the Victoria Faith was involved in another incident off Jamaica in January.

"While it is encouraging to see the number of reported piratical attacks decline generally, there were still some regions which suffered a high number of attacks," the report said.

"The decline in reported piracy incidents should not be taken as the reason to reduce anti-piracy strategies."