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HEADLINE: Prime terror target South Korea ready to counter extremist attack

BODY:

SOUTH Korean ports are attractive terror targets, but tight security will minimise the impact of any attempted attack, writes **Melissa Murphy**.

As the third largest participant in Iraqi reconstruction after the US and Britain, South Korea is a prime target for an extremist attack.

In April the Yellow-Red organisation threatened to attack allies of the US in east Asia and in July an unnamed Islamic terror group threatened South Korean shipping companies transporting goods to US forces in Iraq.

After the release of an al-Qa'eda audiotape calling for attacks on US allies, specifically South Korea, counter-terrorism units, including Special Forces 707th Mission Battalion, were put on high alert.

For its part Seoul has implemented stringent anti-terror measures to reduce the risk of attack. In January the government signed the US Container Security Initiative.

Pusan, South Korea's largest port, undertakes comprehensive screening and inspection of high risk containers before sealing them.

In July, the United Nations rated South Korea's 23 main ports compliant with the International Ship and Port Facility Security code.

Ports such as Pyeongtaek, which house explosive LPG and LNG, are now patrolled by armed police around the clock.

South Korea, which already holds regular maritime anti-terror drills with the US and Japan, also held exercises with Russia in June which included mock bomb attacks on shipping and hostage taking scenarios. South Korea's navy will inaugurate a special anti-terror escort squadron to protect the country's maritime interests.

The squadron comprises two destroyers, a support ship, and two anti-submarine Lynx helicopters. There are plans to add a 1,300 ton landing ship and Aegis-equipped destroyers in the future.

Therefore, while the threat to South Korea's ports and shipping remains high in comparison with other countries in the region, security is broadly impressive, with advanced radar and other systems already in place to prevent North Korean attacks on the South's maritime interests.

Still, clashes between the two countries have occurred regularly over the years and are particularly common during the fishing season from May to June.

In 2002 North and South Korea engaged in the Yellow Sea Battle in which more than 50 people were killed or wounded, and a South Korean patrol boat sank.

As written for Lloyd's List by Exclusive Analysis (www.exclusive-analysis.com).