

SOUTH CHINA SEA CLASH

Coastguard shoots dead Vietnamese fisherman

KUALA LUMPUR: The Malaysian coastguard shot dead a Vietnamese fisherman whose boat tried to ram a patrol vessel in the South China Sea, an official said yesterday.

The incident took place in Malaysian waters, where local fishermen have complained in the past about Vietnamese fishing boats that damage their nets.

Coastguard chief Vice-Admiral Datuk Mohd Zubil Mat Som told AFP that two Vietnamese fishing boats entered Malaysian waters some 80 nautical miles from Tok Bali, off the northeastern state of Kelantan late on Sunday.

"The coastguard crew had earlier fired warning shots in the air, but after they rammed and threw a bottle of petrol, my men had no choice but to open fire in self defence," he said.

Zubil alleged the Vietnamese crew had thrown petrol and a tyre to try and set fire to the coastguard boat, which was damaged by the "aggressive ramming".

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Kelantan Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency director Captain Muhd Nur Syam Asmawie Yaacob pointing to the Vietnamese fishing vessels that were towed off Tok Bali yesterday. BERNAMA PIC

One Vietnamese fisherman suffered gunshot wounds and was pronounced dead after he was brought to shore.

"We are saddened by this deadly incident. But I can guarantee... my men took this action to protect their lives and to protect our national sovereignty," Zubil said.

The Vietnamese boats with the remaining 20 crew members were towed to the coastguard jetty.

Parts of the South China Sea are subject to rival claims by Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan and Vietnam, while China

claims the entire waterway.

Rival claims to the sea, which straddles vital shipping lanes and covers rich fishing grounds, makes it a potential flashpoint for conflict. China and Asean — where four claimants are members of — are in talks for a code of conduct in the area.

While not a claimant, the United States has been sending freedom of navigation patrols in international waters, but China has slammed these as interference in regional affairs.

In February, Putrajaya sought

to secure a deal with Hanoi to end alleged intrusions into Malaysian waters by Vietnamese vessels.

Both boats and fishermen were towed to the Maritime Headquarters in Tok Bali for investigation under Section 15 (1)(a) of the Fisheries Act 1985, which provides a fine of up to RM6 million on the skipper and RM600,000 on each crew member.

"The body of the victim, in his 30s, was sent to Tengku Anis Hospital in Pasir Puteh for an autopsy," said Kelantan Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency

director Captain Muhd Nur Syam Asmawie Yaacob.

He said offenders could also be charged under the Immigration Act 1959/1963, Section 6 (1) (c), which provides a fine of RM10,000 or imprisonment not exceeding five years or both and whipping not more than six times.

He said MMEA would investigate and charge the crew under Section 307 of the Penal Code for attempted murder and Section 186 of the Penal Code for obstructing the duties of civil servants.

Agencies