

Travel Warnings: parts of Malaysia

The US State Department has issued a travel warning for parts of Sabah, a Malaysian Borneo state and outlying islands. But the Malaysian government says the warning is misplaced.

The US Embassy in Kuala Lumpur issued a travel notice on 15th January and that was carried over to the US Department of State travel service. It has an expiry date of 15th April.

But the Malaysian government says that the damage to the local economy, which places a heavy reliance on tourism in the state, will already be done because the period of the notice covers the primary booking season for the summer season falls within the period of the notice.

The US says that US citizens should be aware of the risk of terrorism and kidnapping in the eastern part of Sabah, in particular areas of Semporna and the islands of Mabul and Sipadan.

The State Department makes specific reference to Southern Philippines terrorist group Abu Sayaf, saying that there are "indications" that they, and organised crime gangs, are planning unspecified violence against foreigners.

State says that there is intelligence about these threats "notwithstanding the government of Malaysia's increased ability to detect, deter and prevent such attacks." Malaysian security sources, however, say that they have no such intelligence or information as to imminent attacks, and if the US has any it should hand it over.

Abu Sayaf uses kidnap for ransom as a form of revenue raising - although it has held onto hostages for long periods in the past.

The two islands are favoured diving locations, reached by a 40 minute boat ride from Semporna.

Sipadan was, until recently, disputed territory between Malaysia and Indonesia, the two countries that share the bulk of Borneo (Brunei has a small area in the north, surrounded by Malaysia)

when the ICJ ruled that it was Malaysian territory in 2002. Inter-government border disputes are common due to the number of islands and the ragged nature of the continental shelf - and because of the potential for substantial oil and gas deposits and the wealth they bring.

But Abu Sayaf has a different approach to borders: it wants to abolish them to create a fundamentalist Muslim superstate and therefore conducts raids on several islands and the north-east coast of Borneo which is close to the Philippines.

However, there have been no such raids for several years and Malaysia is therefore sceptical, in the absence of any evidence or worthwhile intelligence, to regard the US warning as having any basis.

However, there may be some risk of increased Abu Sayaf activity generally - across the whole region in which they operate: the Philippines security forces have had a series of successes of arresting or killing leaders of the terrorist group which has links to al Qaeda and the survivors may feel a need to flex their muscles to prove they are still a force to be reckoned with. If the US has relevant information, then it may be that Abu Sayaf see the Malaysian area, in particular the islands, as a relatively soft target given the substantial presence of security forces in their own Mindanao area of operations.

However, this is speculation based on extrapolating known factors. The US is jittery: it warned against travel to Bali over Christmas because of similar "intelligence." The reality is that the US is having an intelligence meltdown after the passenger on a flight set fire to his trousers, allegedly in a failed attempt to blow up the plane on approach into Detroit, and President Obama's comment that there was intel but the agencies failed to join up the dots. Now US agencies have to be seen to be working on the problem and so more warnings are likely, regardless of the quality of the intel.