

The Risk Professional: a boat afloat signals hostiles' entry

It's the kind of news that doesn't look like news; but view it as intelligence and it becomes important.

A small boat is discovered empty, floating on the tide off Sri Lanka. There are no signs of people or cargo or - tellingly - oars.

It is the absence of oars that raises the interest of the Sri Lankan anti-terrorism police for if a boat has no means of propulsion, it's a fairly useless means of transport.

Small boats are, generally, powered by an outboard engine. And no oars means that the boat needed an engine. But it's not there, and there are no signs of it having been torn off.

So what's the story?

The anti-terrorist police say that finding boats like this is not especially unusual. But it is worrying. The absence of the engine means that it delivered its cargo, and they were not lost at sea: after all, if one is being washed overboard, the last thing you would want to try to salvage is a 150kg of outboard with zero buoyancy.

The cargo will have been "hostiles" - possibly with weapons - slipping into Sri Lanka. The engines, which have value and can be re-used - are taken from the boat and buried then the boat is pushed off into the falling tide.

So, somewhere, the authorities now believe, there are a small number of dedicated persons who have slipped ashore.