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PLANNING NATIONAL STRATEGIES--Marine interests at stake / Terrorist threat real at ports

The Yomiuri Shimbun

This is the 15th installment of the fifth "Planning National Strategies" series, which examines the current state of affairs facing Japan as a maritime nation.

People who fish for fun off piers were those who first noticed changes in the scenery at ports.

Over the past two years, long fences measuring as high as two meters have been built on piers at a number of ports, such as Yokohama, Kobe, Niigata and Kitakyushu, which are used by ocean-going ships. These fences are equipped with security cameras and sensors designed to detect intruders. At the gates, guards carry out security checks.

These measures, which effectively drove out anglers, came as the law on the security of international ships and ports took effect in July, 2004, following legislation enacted by the Diet earlier that year.

The law obliged municipal governments that manage international ports to set up restricted zones, with fences and other security equipment, and to take punitive measures against violators. It covers about 1,900 facilities at 126 ports accommodating ocean-going vessels.

The legislation came amid increased concerns over terrorism in the wake of the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the United States.

At the urging of the United States, the International Maritime Organization in 2002 adopted revisions to the International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea to beef up antiterrorism measures concerning ports and maritime transport services.

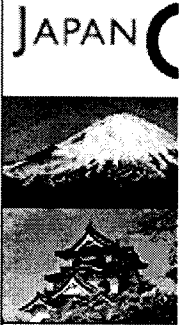
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The revised treaty stipulates that restricted zones be set up at port facilities used for international transit under certain conditions and that checks of ships be strengthened.

It usually takes several years to finalize an international treaty on maritime affairs. But it took only a year for the treaty to be concluded, taking effect in July 2004.

As part of its war against terrorism, the United States also has started creating worldwide networks of antiterrorism measures at ports from which U.S.-bound ships embark, to prevent the transport of terrorists and weapons of mass destruction.

Also, it has implemented exchange programs with other nations, including Japan, for customs officers conducting checks on containers set to be shipped to the United States from those countries.

The United States also enacted a law on maritime security following the 9/11 terrorist attacks. It includes a clause that ships that have left foreign ports may be prohibited from entering U.S. ports if the U.S. authorities, after conducting inspections, conclude that security measures at those ports are unsatisfactory.

Inspections at foreign ports are conducted by U.S. Coast Guard officers in line with the law.

At an international seminar on education and training of maritime security personnel held in Tokyo in March, U.S. Coast Guard Lt. Cmdr. Christopher Robinson spoke about the importance of antiterrorism measures at ports around the world.

Robinson, of the U.S. Coast Guard's Activities Far East, urged that any flaw in marine transportation systems would have a global impact. Maritime security is not something that can be achieved by a single country, he added.

He hailed antiterrorism measures at Japanese ports, saying that it was remarkable that security systems had been established at all international ports in such a short period of time.

But such praise should be accepted with some reservation, if the effectiveness of such measures are taken into account.

In January, police arrested a Japanese man and two Filipino crew members on suspicion of smuggling handguns and ammunition on a Philippines-registered

cargo ship which docked at Yokohama Port.

The unemployed Japanese man had obtained a pass to enter the restricted area of the port from the Yokohama city government that manages the port. He freely entered the zone, disguising himself as a vender selling goods for crew members of ships in port.

The incident shocked the Construction and Transport Ministry, prompting them to work with the city's Port and Harbor Bureau to inspect the baggage of everyone entering the area on business.

The ministry also has started inspections of ports to be regulated under the domestic port security law once a year. Inspections usually uncover some kind of trouble at more than 80 percent of the regulated ports nationwide, officials said.

Kiyoshi Ikeda, an official of the ministry's Ports and Harbors Bureau, admitted that security measures taken at ports were unsatisfactory.

"Even if security guards are positioned at main gates, there is no one at other entrances. Gates are thus poorly managed and security not at a level where surprise checks can be made. We're now providing training and instruction," Ikeda said.

Under the new law, the ministry has introduced a system where levels of terrorism warnings--from level 1 for normal to level 3 for the most dangerous--can be changed in accordance with the level of terrorist threat.

If the levels were raised, additional action, such as inspections of loads on every truck that enters and leaves the restricted zone could be undertaken. But it is unknown whether this measure would work effectively.

"Some people involved in the port and harbor management don't even know that there is a level 3. Even if facilities are fully equipped, it would be meaningless until awareness of antiterrorism measures is drastically improved," said Hitohiko Yamakawa, manager of the Business Division of IMOS, a maritime security consulting company led by former Japan Coast Guard officers.

Now is the time when antiterrorism measures are needed at ports, just like airports. But the nation has only just started taking such measures.

(Jun. 14, 2006)