

JOINT MARITIME SECURITY EFFORTS BETWEEN INDONESIA AND SABAH IN COMBATING HUMAN SMUGGLING (2023-2025)

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Abstract. This study analyzes Indonesia–Sabah maritime security efforts through joint patrols in the Sebatik–Tawau waters in addressing human smuggling practices during the 2023–2025 period. This region has high vulnerability due to geographical proximity, open sea routes, and socio-economic inequality exploited by transnational criminal groups. The border’s porous maritime characteristics and the intensity of cross-border mobility further increase the risk of irregular migration and organized smuggling networks. This study applies a descriptive qualitative method, with data collected through document analysis, official government reports, policy papers, and credible news sources related to maritime security and border governance. The findings indicate that joint patrols have contributed to strengthening maritime surveillance, increasing deterrence, and enhancing operational coordination between Indonesian and Sabah authorities. These patrols also support faster response mechanisms to suspicious activities at sea. However, the effectiveness of these efforts remains constrained by several challenges, including the adaptive strategies of smuggling networks, limited monitoring of unofficial routes, resource constraints, and suboptimal cross-border intelligence sharing. Differences in legal frameworks and operational procedures also affect coordination. This study concludes that addressing human smuggling in the Sebatik–Tawau waters requires a more comprehensive and sustainable strategy through stronger bilateral cooperation, improved inter-agency coordination, institutional capacity building, and community-based prevention initiatives in border areas.

Keywords: *maritime security, joint patrol, human smuggling, Sebatik-Tawau, Indonesia-Malaysia*

Introduction

The increase in human smuggling cases in the Indonesia-Malaysia border region, particularly on Sebatik Island, confirms that this region is one of the hotspots for illegal migration in Southeast Asia. In 2023, a joint operation by the Nunukan Immigration Office and the Indonesian National Armed Forces (TNI) successfully apprehended 25 perpetrators of human trafficking (TPPO), including three Malaysian citizens and several prospective Indonesian migrant workers without proper documentation. This discovery demonstrates that illegal migration activities involve not only local actors but also cross-border actors, exploiting the social and economic vulnerabilities of border communities. This case demonstrates that smugglers operate in a structured manner, using narrow sea lanes, high-speed speedboats, and exploiting the lack of surveillance in hard-to-reach waters. This situation demands that Indonesia strengthen maritime security, particularly through large-scale patrols that combine the roles of immigration, the TNI, and local security forces (Anshori, 2023). The latest report, published in 2025, shows that smuggling practices continue to recur despite routine operations. In February 2025, dozens of prospective illegal migrant workers were again discovered attempting to be smuggled via the Sebatik sea route to Tawau. The fact that the victims lacked legal travel documents or work permits highlights the lack of awareness of safe migration among the community and the strength of recruitment networks in border villages. That

year also illustrated the phenomenon of "push-pull factors," a situation where the economy in border areas encourages people to take risks, while the demand for cheap labor in Malaysia attracts a wave of migrants through illegal channels. This demonstrates that law enforcement alone is insufficient. Bilateral cooperation and community-based prevention strategies are needed to significantly reduce smuggling (BPWP, 2025).

In addition to law enforcement, regional coordination efforts are increasingly open and offer significant opportunities for strengthening. A training session organized by the Regional Support Office (RSO) of the Bali Process brought together Indonesia and Malaysia to improve response mechanisms to irregular maritime migration. The activity emphasized the importance of a protection approach, including early identification of human trafficking victims, protection efforts for vulnerable migrants, and strengthening the authorities' capacity to handle risky situations at sea. The RSO highlighted that human smuggling in Southeast Asia is complex, involving networks spread across multiple points, inter-state funding, and constantly changing sea routes. Therefore, both countries are encouraged to strengthen communication, establish joint patrols, and establish early detection systems in border areas. Malaysia's 2025 report emphasized that the Malaysian government also sees a growing threat of migrant smuggling through Tawau, Semporna, and Lahad Datu. The Malaysian government highlighted that the majority of illegal migrants entering the country originate through Indonesian sea routes, particularly Sebatik and Nunukan, necessitating increased cooperation with Indonesia to limit the scope for these criminal groups to operate. Malaysia noted that maritime criminal activities such as human smuggling, drug trafficking, and goods smuggling increasingly threaten the security and stability of Sabah. This makes it strategically important for Malaysia to strengthen joint maritime patrols with Indonesia, while simultaneously strengthening immigration regulations and monitoring small ports that are prone to abuse (Bernama, 2025a).

Indonesia's efforts to thwart the smuggling of illegal migrant workers continue. A report by local media outlet Detik in 2024 indicated that the Indonesian Maritime Security Agency (Bakamla RI) and the Indonesian National Armed Forces (TNI) again thwarted the smuggling of 25 illegal Indonesian Migrant Workers (PMI) via the Nunukan-Tawau sea route. This case highlights that despite routine patrols and security measures, criminal groups are still able to find loopholes through route changes, the use of small boats with large engines, and operations at times difficult to monitor, or late-night crossings. The success of Indonesian security forces in this operation demonstrates the strengthening of inter-agency collaboration, but also underscores the challenge that maritime crime is highly flexible to security patterns (Balang, 2025). Looking at the overall development of cases in 2023-2025, it is clear that the phenomenon of human smuggling in the waters of Sebatik-Tawau is not a temporary problem, but a fundamental obstacle in maritime security governance that arises from a combination of security, economic factors, and weak cross-border regulations. Open sea lanes, geographic proximity accessible by speedboat, and high social dynamics make this region an attraction for various forms of transnational crime. Therefore, this study focuses on analyzing Indonesia-Sabah maritime security efforts through joint patrols, with the aim of assessing the effectiveness of bilateral collaboration in suppressing human smuggling, understanding the field dynamics faced by security forces, and evaluating the extent to which current security strategies are able to address evolving crime patterns. This approach is important to provide a real picture of policy

effectiveness, as well as offer evidence-based recommendations for strengthening border security going forward.

Literature review

Research by Romadhani et al. (2024) highlights illegal migration and human smuggling as threats to Indonesia's national security from a criminological perspective. This study emphasizes that human smuggling criminal groups operate in an organized manner, exploiting social gaps and weak state oversight. However, this research focuses on the national picture and does not examine specific forms in maritime border areas such as Sebatik and Tawau. Furthermore, the study does not explain how maritime security units such as Bakamla, the Indonesian Navy (TNI AL), or the Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency (APMM) respond to the movement patterns of criminal groups at sea. Thus, there is a gap in the analysis of operational practices in waters regarding the relationship between criminal group methods and maritime security capacity in strategic locations like Sebatik (Romadhani et al., 2024). Indonesia-Malaysia security cooperation in dealing with illegal immigrants on Sebatik Island, demonstrates that bilateral mechanisms play a crucial role in managing border vulnerabilities. However, this study's focus is limited to general policy aspects and does not operationally evaluate the effectiveness of joint maritime patrols in Sebatik-Tawau waters. The study also does not address the role of maritime security enforcement agencies such as Bakamla or APMM in depth, thus incompletely describing the responses in the field. This opens a research gap regarding how joint patrol mechanisms actually work in the context of increased human smuggling in 2023–2025.

Sampetoding and Burhanuddin (2025) examined human smuggling and trafficking in Indonesia's maritime border areas, including North Kalimantan, emphasizing structural, social, and institutional barriers. While providing a broad understanding of the causes of human smuggling, this study did not focus on the Sebatik-Tawau sea route as a major smuggling point in the recent period. Furthermore, this study focused on the root causes and did not analyze state responses through cross-border maritime patrols or the effectiveness of maritime law enforcement measures. Thus, there is a need to fill this research gap regarding the role of maritime security and the effectiveness of joint Indonesia-Sabah patrols in addressing human smuggling in this highly active maritime sector with immigrants (Sampetoding and Burhanuddin, 2025). Based on various previous studies, it can be concluded that research on human smuggling in the Indonesia-Malaysia border region generally focuses on legal aspects, bilateral cooperation, and the socio-economic vulnerability of border communities. However, most of these studies have not yet thoroughly discussed the operational dimensions of maritime security, particularly the role of joint patrols in the Sebatik-Tawau waters as a primary human smuggling route. In this context, the theory of bilateral cooperation (Buzan et al., 2003) emphasizes that bilateral security between two countries is formed through direct interaction, based on mutual interests, trust, and transparency, which allows for the effective handling of specific threats. Therefore, this study uses a maritime security approach (Bueger, 2015) to analyze joint patrols as an element of surveillance and law enforcement at sea, as well as a human security approach (UNDP, 1994). To understand human smuggling as a non-traditional security issue that directly impacts individual safety and vulnerability. The integration of these two approaches is expected to provide a more comprehensive analysis of efforts to address human smuggling in the waters of Sebatik-Tawau.

Materials and Methods

This study uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive-analytical form to analyze the maritime security efforts of Indonesia - Sabah through joint patrols in the waters of Sebatik-Tawau in dealing with human smuggling practices during the period 2023-2025. The qualitative approach was chosen because it allows researchers to deeply understand the meaning, dynamics, and social and institutional contexts that underlie the phenomenon of maritime security and transboundary crime. Qualitative research aims to understand how individuals or groups handle the social circumstances they face, with analysis that develops from field data and considers the existing social picture (King, 1991). This method allows for the use of several data collection techniques, such as document review, official report tracing, and analysis of news reports and articles related to joint patrols and human smuggling cases. The data obtained is then analyzed to identify patterns, practices, and emerging challenges in implementing maritime security in the Sebatik-Tawau waters (King, 1991). In this study, the researcher played a direct role as the primary stakeholder, collecting and interpreting data based on actual conditions in the study area. The researcher's involvement in this process is crucial to ensure the results provide a clear, in-depth, and accountable picture of the joint Indonesia-Sabah patrol efforts in addressing human smuggling (Samsu, 2017).

Results and Discussion

Maritime security vulnerability in the Sebatik-Tawau area

The Sebatik-Tawau region faces a high level of maritime security vulnerability due to its geographically and socio-economically open border. This region faces multiple threats, ranging from high levels of illegal cross-border activity, limited surveillance facilities, to sea routes exploited by criminal groups. Security conditions on Sebatik Island are relatively unstable, influenced by the social and economic interactions of border residents who are heavily dependent on Tawau, thus opening up opportunities for human smuggling (Dinanti and Marzaman, 2025). The disparity in prosperity between Indonesia and Malaysia makes this border region vulnerable to human trafficking. Unofficial routes allow illegal migrants to evade immigration checks, making human smuggling not only a form of crime but also a consequence of the border conditions themselves (Kubota et al., 2023). Several reports indicate that the Sebatik-Tawau waters remain a major route for human smuggling to Malaysia. The Indonesian Navy and a joint task force regularly thwart unscrupulous smuggling of prospective Indonesian migrant workers (CPMI) in Sebatik. For example, the Navy successfully prevented the departure of seven illegal CPMIs, and the Indonesian Military Task Force thwarted dozens of illegal workers, including 15 children. This confirms that the border sea route remains vulnerable, particularly because access to the Sebatik PLBN is not yet fully operational, resulting in limited oversight (Abriandi, 2025; Syalzhabillah, 2025).

Smuggling activities in the Sebatik-Tawau waters are becoming increasingly complex with the use of digital technology. Criminal groups are using social media to offer illegal transportation services abroad, demonstrating increasingly sophisticated methods that are difficult for security forces to detect (Nizam, 2025). Maritime security vulnerabilities in the Sebatik-Tawau region are inextricably linked to the open nature of the border region, both geographically and socio-economically. Several reports indicate that sea routes in this region are still frequently used as entry and exit routes for illegal

migrants. The arrest of 33 illegal migrants by the Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency (MMEA) demonstrates that Sabah's border waters, including the route to Tawau, remain a hotspot for cross-border human smuggling (The Sun, 2025). Maritime security in the Sebatik-Tawau region is increasingly vulnerable due to suboptimal official oversight of cross-border flows, particularly along sea routes with numerous unofficial access routes. This situation has prompted the Ministry of Protection of Indonesian Migrant Workers (P2MI) to urge the accelerated opening of the State Cross-Border Post (PLBN) in Sebatik, despite the availability of supporting infrastructure. The PLBN's lack of full operation weakens oversight of the movement of migrant workers, goods, and citizens across borders, opening opportunities for the practice of sending migrant workers without formal procedures and human trafficking. The push to open the PLBN reflects the government's awareness that the open nature of the Sebatik border and its proximity to Tawau requires a more structured oversight mechanism to suppress illegal cross-border activity and sustainably strengthen regional maritime security (Kathrina, 2025).

Human smuggling criminal group strategy

The human smuggling group in Sebatik and Tawau operates in an organized manner, utilizing recruitment, transfer, and document forgery networks at various border points. They exploit victims' economic needs, spread false job offers, and use small boats to avoid detection by patrol radar (Kubota et al., 2023). The perpetrators typically operate in small groups, exploiting weaknesses in maritime surveillance, slow security responses, and minimal cross-border coordination. This strategy allows them to be flexible and adapt to security patrols (Santoso et al., 2025). Some migrants choose illegal routes because of the lower costs, although this increases their vulnerability to exploitation. Thus, the practice of human smuggling is not only the result of criminal planning but is also driven by the economic circumstances of the victims (Sartika and Burhanuddin, 2023). The arrest of a married couple in Nunukan, who acted as recruiters and intermediaries for illegal migrants to Malaysia, demonstrates the existence of a small but widespread network. They utilize unofficial ports and small boats that are difficult to detect on radar (Anshori, 2025a). This criminal group exploits the victims' economic needs, unofficial routes, and small boats to avoid detection. In the Nunukan case, smugglers were paid Rp 4.42 million per person to send illegal migrant workers to Malaysia by sea (Hakim, 2024). Furthermore, a report on the thwarting of an illegal migrant worker smuggling attempt by a joint task force in Sebatik indicates that the perpetrators exploited the victims' economic needs and geographic proximity to Tawau as the primary reasons for choosing illegal routes. Beyond human smuggling, the use of the same sea route for smuggling illegal goods, such as used clothing, confirms that criminal groups are maximizing a single route for various types of cross-border crimes. This suggests that human smuggling in the Sebatik-Tawau area is not an isolated phenomenon, but rather part of a larger maritime crime pattern (BPWP, 2025; Kurmala, 2024).

State response and effectiveness of joint patrols between Indonesia and Malaysia

Efforts to address human smuggling in the Sebatik-Tawau waters depend heavily on maritime coordination between Indonesia and Malaysia. Although both countries have a strong legal basis under Law 21/2007 and the Anti-Trafficking in Persons and Anti-

Smuggling of Migrants Act 2007, implementation still faces challenges, so law enforcement alone is insufficient without operational support on the ground (Kubota et al., 2023). In Indonesia, border surveillance is often hampered by weak inter-agency coordination, a lack of shared surveillance data, and limited maritime patrol infrastructure. This means that routine patrols sometimes fail to detect illegal migrants arriving at night (Kubota et al., 2023). Maritime cooperation between the two countries is key because smuggling practices are transnational. Joint patrols align with the regional maritime security approach in Southeast Asia (Santoso et al., 2025). In Sabah, particularly Tawau, security forces continue to strengthen maritime patrols and surveillance, including arresting those entering without proper documentation. Meanwhile, in Indonesia, the Indonesian Navy and Army are actively preventing the departure of illegal migrants via sea routes and unofficial ports in Sebatik and Nunukan (Anshori, 2025b; Marison, 2025). The Indonesian Consulate (KRI) in Tawau in Malaysia actively urges citizens not to be tempted to work illegally in Malaysia, demonstrating both countries' awareness of the risks of human smuggling. The Indonesian Navy (TNI AL) and the joint task force continue to thwart the departure of illegal migrants, indicating strengthened cross-border patrols and coordination. However, limited oversight of unofficial ports and backwaters remains a significant challenge to maritime security (Aditya, 2024). On the Malaysian side, the Immigration and MMEA are also continuously enhancing maritime surveillance. While joint patrols are crucial, structural challenges remain, such as information exchange, monitoring of unofficial ports, and cross-agency coordination. Thus, joint patrols are a crucial tool, but their success requires strengthening more integrated maritime security governance (Bernama, 2025b; Kathrina, 2025; Sanudin, 2025).

Conclusion

This study concludes that the practice of human smuggling in the Sebatik-Tawau waters during the 2023-2025 period constitutes a cross-border problem that cannot be addressed unilaterally by any single country. Based on the theory of bilateral cooperation, maritime security threats in the Indonesia-Malaysia border area arise as a consequence of intensive interactions between regions that are geographically and socio-economically interconnected. The proximity of the Sebatik and Tawau regions and the openness of sea routes create space for criminal groups to operate across national borders, thus demanding coordination and shared responsibility between Indonesia and Malaysia. The research findings indicate that bilateral cooperation through joint patrols in the Sebatik-Tawau waters plays a significant role in enhancing maritime security and reducing the scope for human smuggling. Joint patrols, integrated operations, and the involvement of security forces from both countries reflect the implementation of the principles of interdependence and shared interests as outlined in the theory of bilateral cooperation. However, the effectiveness of this cooperation still faces various obstacles, particularly limited information exchange, differences in institutional capacity, and suboptimal oversight of unofficial sea routes and ports.

Furthermore, this study emphasizes the importance of respecting migrants' human rights in maritime security enforcement efforts. Human smuggling not only poses a security threat but also places victims at risk of exploitation and human rights violations. Therefore, mitigation strategies must integrate human rights protection principles, including fulfilling migrants' rights to legal protection and safety during

security interventions. This study also found that the dynamics of bilateral cooperation have not fully matched the flexibility and adaptability of criminal groups. Changes in *modus operandi*, the use of digital technology, and the utilization of local networks indicate that maritime security cooperation still tends to be reactive. This emphasizes that sustainable bilateral cooperation requires strengthened operational coordination mechanisms, clearer role allocations between institutions, and a more integrated cross-border communication system. Thus, this study concludes that joint Indonesia–Malaysia patrols are an important instrument in addressing human smuggling in the Sebatik–Tawau region, but they cannot stand alone. Based on the theory of bilateral cooperation, maritime security principles, and human rights, the success of addressing cross-border crime depends heavily on the long-term commitment of both countries to strengthen coordination, policy harmonization, integration of law enforcement efforts, and protection of migrant rights. Without such strengthening, bilateral cooperation has the potential to be less than optimal in addressing the growing challenge of human smuggling in maritime border areas.

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Conflict of interest

The authors confirm that there is no conflict of interest involve with any parties in this research study.

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