

Russia warns Britain: Sail near Crimea again and your sailors will get hurt

MOSCOW, July 14 (Reuters) – A senior Russian security official warned Britain on Wednesday not to sail its warships near Russian-annexed Crimea again unless it wanted its sailors to get hurt.

The warning, issued by Mikhail Popov, deputy secretary of Russia's Security Council, follows an incident last month when British warship HMS Defender exercised what London said were internationally recognized freedom of navigation rules in Ukrainian territorial waters near Crimea.

Russia annexed Crimea from Ukraine in 2014 and says the waters around it belong to Moscow now despite most countries continuing to recognize the peninsula as Ukrainian.

It protested strongly against the British move at the time with a coastguard vessel firing warning shots and summoned the British ambassador for an explanation.

Popov, in an interview in the state Rossiyskaya Gazeta newspaper, said Britain's behaviour and its subsequent reaction to the incident was bewildering.

In particular, he criticized suggestions from British Prime Minister Boris Johnson and Dominic Raab, the foreign minister, that the incident could be repeated.

"Similar actions will be thwarted with the harshest methods in future by Russia regardless of the violator's state allegiance. We suggest our opponents think hard about whether it's worth organizing such provocations given the capabilities of Russia's armed forces," said Popov.

"It's not the members of the British government who will be in the ships and vessels used for prevocational ends," he added. "And it's in that context that I want to ask a question of the same Boris Johnson and Dominic Raab – what will they say to the families of the British sailors who will get hurt in the name of such 'great' ideas?"

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