Summary (As of 1600 Hrs UTC)

Russian media reports indicate that two Russian cargo ships have been hit by Ukrainian missiles.

Several Russian news agencies, citing the country's Federal Security Services' (FSB) border department for the Krasnodar Territory, have reported that two Russian commercial cargo ships have been targeted by Ukrainian missiles in the Sea of Azov. The two vessels have been identified as the 3,300 dwt *SGV Flot* owned by Samarshipping and the 4,000 dwt *Seraphim Sarovskiy* owned by Rechmortrans. The FSB has reported that the 1981-buildt cargo vessel *SGV Flot*, which was carrying oil at the time of the incident, sustained damage, adding that a fire broke out on board the ship and one crewmember sustained injuries. The ship's crewmembers managed to extinguish the fire and both *SGV Flot* and *Seraphim Sarovski* continued their voyage, according to FSB. Russian media report that the two vessels were hit by the Ukrainian Armed Forces' missile strike at around 11:00 AM (GMT +3) on Thursday 24 February as a Ukrainian response to the invasion by Russian troops earlier in the day. It is believed that the missiles were fired from the port city of Mariupol. Readers should be aware that reports on these two incidents have not been independently verified and are currently only being reported in Russian media. Ukraine has so far not responded to reports of the attack. Likewise, reports of these incidents could be used as a pretext for Russia to target merchant shipping and other vessels in the Black Sea and Sea of Azov.

Reports also indicate that a Cargill-chartered bulker has been hit by a shell in the Black Sea as Russia continues its attack on Ukraine. According to reports, an ultramax bulker controlled by Yasa Shipping in Turkey was hit by a projectile while underway from the port of Odessa.

The Federal Marine and River Transport Agency, Rosmorrechtflot, has reported that Russia has decided to suspend the movement of commercial ships in the Sea of Azov "until further notice," The short-sea shipping in the Kerch Strait remains uninterrupted. Unconfirmed reports indicate that Russia is likely to target the port of Mariupol next, in an attempt to squeeze Ukraine's economy.

On the Ground

On the ground, the situation continues to be fast-moving. Early on Thursday 24 February, Russian forces invaded Ukraine from multiple directions, including from the separatist regions in the Donbass to the east, as well as Belarus to the north and from occupied Crimea to the south. A majority of the fighting currently appears to be centred around the eastern region of the country, though clashes have also been reported around the capital Kyiv in the north and the Black Sea port cities of Odessa and Mariupol in the south. Airstrikes have been carried out, targeting Ukrainian military bases and airports, with fierce fighting reported around a key airport near Kyiv. The Ukrainian

military has claimed to have shot down at least six Russian aircraft, while Russia is claiming to have destroyed more than 70 military targets in Ukraine.

Many Ukrainians are seeking shelter or trying to leave larger cities across the country, including thousands who have fled Kyiv. With Ukraine closing its airspace to civilian flights, huge traffic jams have built up. Queues have also formed for buses, checkpoints and petrol. A number of European countries that border Ukraine, including Poland, Slovakia, and Hungary, have already announced that they are preparing for the influx of refugees.

Meanwhile there are also concerns that Belarus may get involved in the conflict in Ukraine. The European Union on Thursday urged Belarus to "not take part" in Russia's military assault on Ukraine. Belarus is a Russian ally and it has permitted tens of thousands of Russian troops to pour across its border into Ukraine. While earlier in the day, the Belarussian leader disclosed that his troops were not involved, he warned that they could if Russia needed help. On Thursday afternoon, reports emerged that four ballistic missiles had been launched from Belarus into Ukraine.

In response to Thursday's invasion of Ukraine, neighbouring countries have quickly reacted to the crisis. The prime minister of Estonia, which borders Russia, has announced that a number of NATO allies that share borders with Russia have agreed to launch consultations under NATO's Article 4. Moldova has declared a state of emergency and is preparing to give help to Ukrainians fleeing the crisis while Lithuanian President Gitanas Nauseda has also stated that he is signing a state of emergency to be approved by parliament. The United States, European Union, United Kingdom, and Japan have imposed sanctions against leading Russians, Russian banks and MPs who backed the move, with more sanctions likely to follow in the coming days. Meanwhile NATO secretary general Jens Stoltenberg has said that "we will continue to do whatever is necessary to shield the alliance from aggression."

Social media has also been utilized to spread misleading posts. While shortly after President Putin declared the beginning of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, videos and images claiming to be from the conflict started to trend on major social networks. While many are genuine footage, some viral clips have shown events from past conflicts, or military exercises, with many of these appearing to come from users who are posting content without checking the validity.

Advisory

The security situation across Ukraine remains fluid and is likely to rapidly deteriorate in the coming days. In recent weeks, regional tensions have significantly risen as Russia has continued to amass troops near its borders with Ukraine. Naval activity in the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov in mid-February also raised fears of a potential risk to commercial shipping transiting this region.

While as of 24 February, Russia has invaded Ukraine through the northern border with Belarus, its western border with Ukraine and through the south, from Crimea, any maritime assaults on Ukraine cannot be ruled out. Access to Ukrainian ports could be closed off by Russian warships in the region in the coming days and weeks. There have been reports that the ports in Odessa and Mariupol were targeted on 24 February, however these have been unconfirmed.

As of 24 February, MS Risk advises all merchant vessel masters to remain alert to heavily armed military vessels in the region and to heed to any warnings and advisories. All vessels should remain vigilant to naval operations and how they may affect intended transits. As the situation continues to develop in Ukraine, the freedom of navigation throughout the wider Black Sea and Sea of Azov currently remains unclear. Any vessels choosing to navigate through this region at this time are strongly advised to keep abreast of the situation and should exercise heightened caution if transiting this region. A risk assessment should be carried out prior to transiting the above mentioned regions and should incorporate appropriate protective measures into vessel security plans. Vessels are further advised to ensure that AIS is transmitting at all times and should monitor VHF Channel 16. In the event of any incident or suspicious activity, vessels are advised to notify the NATO Shipping Centre. It is possible that vessels operating in this area may encounter GPS interference, AIS spoofing, and/or other communications jamming.

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- Crisis management

- Business continuity management

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VIRTUAL SECURITY DIRECTOR SERVICE

- For clients lacking a full-time security executive

References are always available.

More information is found at www.msrisk.com

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