危機四伏

wei1 jī1 sì4 fù2

There has been a series of sea accidents recently. In one, a jetfoil hit a bridge pylon off Tuen Mun. In another, a policeman on retirement leave was killed when his small fishing boat was rammed by a much bigger one.

Captains told of the risk of accidents when operating sea vessels in the spring foggy weather. They said it is like “driving a car blindfolded” and is “危機四伏” (wei1 jī1 sì4 fù2).

“危機” (wei1 jī1) is “a crisis,” “danger,” “四” (sì4) is “four” and “伏” (fù2) “to hide in ambush,” “to lie low,” “to crouch.” Literally, “危機四伏” (wei1 jī1 sì4 fù2) is “crises four lie low,” which does not seem to make too much sense.

The “四” (sì4) “four” in the idiom does not mean four crises, or being hit by crises four times. It refers to the four directions. So “危機四伏” (wei1 jī1 sì4 fù2) is “crises lying in wait in four directions,” “danger all around.”

The idiom is used to describe situations that are “perilous,” “crisis-ridden.” It also means “to be threatened by growing crisis.”

There are two other idioms that have a similar meaning and also contain “四” (sì4) “four.” “四面楚歌” (sì4 miàn4 chu3 ge1) and “四面受敵” (sì4 miàn4 shòu4 di2) both mean surrounded by enemy on all sides.

High-profile and high-power political jobs are “危機四伏” (wei1 jī1 sì4 fù2) and people in those positions will find themselves “四面受敵” (sì4 miàn4 shòu4 di2) all the time.

Terms containing the character “伏” (fù2) include:

伏擊 (fù2 jī1) – to ambush
伏法 (fù2 fǎ3) – to be executed
伏特 (fù2 tuò4) – a volt
屈伏 (qū1 fù2) – to bend in submission