

Piracy in Somalia 'out of control'

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By Jane Fazackarley

The problem of Somali piracy is out of control, according to a news report broadcast by ITN, and is continuing to worsen with two ships - the Beluga Fortune and MV York, a tanker carrying liquefied gas - being seized recently.

On October 24 the captain of Beluga Fortune made a report that his ship had been attacked by pirates on the Somali coast. A later report said that pirates were on board and that crew members were able to disable the ships propulsion. HMS Montrose came to the rescue on October 25, the pirates left the ship and Royal Marines freed the crew who were in a safe room.

MV York had 17 crew aboard when it was hijacked by pirates along the Kenyan coast. According to the website for the European Union Naval Force Somalia force, the tanker was confirmed pirated on the October 24. MV York had not long left Mombassa and was heading to the Seychelles when it came under attack. Turkish warship GAZIANTEP launched an helicopter and saw that armed pirates were aboard the ship

According to the European Union Naval Force Somalia website, another vessel, the MV Golden Blessing, was released on November 6 and MV Samho Dream released on November 7. The site also details an incident where the warship SPS INFANTA CRISTINA came under attack when it was escorting another ship along the Somali coast a few days ago, the first time that an EU warship acting as an escort has been attacked.

Piracy is common in Strait of Malacca, Indonesia, Venezuela, Nigeria and the Persian Gulf and other places around the world but it is the Gulf of Aden, located in the Arabian Sea between Yemen and Somalia, that has made the news most often following the frequent attacks from Somali pirates.

According to the ICC Commercial Crime Services website Somali pirates were behind 44 percent of the 289 piracy attacks in the first nine months of this year and they carried out 35 hijackings up until September this year.

Captain James Staples was a ships master for 17 years operating in the Middle East-Gulf of Aden area. He is also a three decade sea captain, Master Mariner and U.S Merchant Marine and consults with the Office of Naval Intelligence. He told me more about when the upsurge in Piracy began:

"We noticed an upturn in Piracy off Somalia around 2006-2007. Prior to that it was minimal and, fishing boats were the major target at that time. What we need to point out is that more sailors are being held captive at this point and time with over 26 vessels awaiting ransom payment The Navy has made a difference in a specific area which only made the Pirates expand their area of plunder. Also note that the insurance companies have increased their area of risk, bringing in more revenue for the insurance industry. What we need to also address are the deplorable conditions that these seaman are living in and that they will be affected the remainder of their lives by this hostage situation. Crew members have been beaten and a few murdered while being held against their will. The piracy situation in Somalia is like a runaway train and we need to put real solutions to ending this problem."

The pirates have extended their reach and their attacks are no longer limited to the Somalia Coast. Last year the MV Charelle was attacked and seized in Oman, the BBC report that there have been attacks in the Indian Ocean where a British couple were captured. Captain Staples told me of an incident from last year when he was captain of MV Green Bay.

“It happened late in 2009 off the coast of Oman. I will not give the location due to the fact that vessels still drift in the area. It was early in the morning on the 04:00-08:00 watch in the morning. The Chief Mate was on watch and his night order instructions were to call the Master for any suspicious craft which may be approaching the vessel. At 04:15 I received a call from the Mate informing me that a small craft was approaching the Green Bay at a high rate of speed. When I arrived on the bridge approximately 2-3 minutes later the small craft was already along side Green Bay. Crew tried every way possible to get the vessel away. Now you must remember that we were drifting awaiting cargo which means the engine is shut down and would take a good 30-45 minutes to get ready before we had propulsion. The ship was a sitting duck. When the small craft decided to approach the gangway area, which is the general boarding area for any ship. It was time for me to react, they had disregarded any attempt we made to keep them clear, and it was at that time that I fired the pistol in their general direction. With the crack sound of a round being fired from the hand gun and the bullet hitting in front of them, they decided to leave quickly, which they did.”

Hundreds of people are reported to be held prisoner by the pirates, British couple Paul and Rachel Chandler who were kidnapped over a year ago are among them, a ransom demand has been made and the UK government reportedly blocked a payment. The VOA news website recently reported that a spokesman for the pirates said in a radio interview that they would not be freed until a ransom is paid.

I asked Captain Staples for his opinion on paying ransom demands, he said:

“As far as the ransom issue is concerned my opinion is that a ransom should not be paid. Ransom payments have only grown in payoff numbers. Nine-ten million dollar ransom is now becoming the normal amount of payment. The pirates understand that they hold all the cards in their hands, and will continue to have ransom demands. The problem has gotten worse, it has not gotten better for sure. Now more than ever the amount of seaman being held which numbers approx 500 has only grown.”

He also told me of a crew member from the MV Iceberg who is reported to have died from malnutrition and three of the other crew members are said to be in poor condition. Captain Staples asks:

"Where is the outcry from the world (U.N) as these sailors die from starvation because the owner will not negotiate the freedom of his crew."

Captain Staples told me more about his work to combat the problem and OceanRiver, a Maritime Consultancy and Security Service:

"I presently consult for a company from Colorado who has security teams which we place on board for physical security. The security team has weapons and has been keeping the crews safe. I also consult for some High tech companies and camera systems. I have been trying to get regulation passed which will make security systems on board ships mandatory as far as, CCTV, thermal imaging, intruder sensors and alarms and keyless entry system on board. Better training when it comes to behavioral training and security in general.”

"OceanRiver offers a wide range of Maritime services. We consult with major law firms concerning piracy. We also provide mechanical expertise when it comes to repairs, overhauls, damage assessments, we also can perform ISM internal audits along with ISPS Internal audits. ISM is the safety management system which is in place on board merchant vessels, while the ISPS is the International ship and port facility security regulations."

In 2008 the UN adopted a resolution which called for states with naval ships close to the Horn of Africa to provide air and naval support to help in the fight against piracy in Somalia. Further resolutions were adopted in 2008, more in 2009 and another in 2010. When I asked his opinion about the effectiveness of these, Captain Staples said:

"The resolutions have done nothing to stop the ongoing problem of piracy on the Horn of Africa. The UN can not stop the fighting inside Somalia with peace keepers. Resolutions will not stop piracy."

Captain Staples also told me:

"Piracy is out of control and only getting worse. Pirates now hold over 500 sailors awaiting ransom payment. We are not doing enough to combat piracy; we need to better protect merchant seaman by enhancing the vessels with better electronic surveillance equipment and, keyless entry systems. We also need to look at increasing the size of crews. Today's ships travel the waterways with the minimum crew size. Fatigue is a major problem on today's sailors, which plays into the piracy problem when your trying to have exhausted sailors stand a vigilant watch lookout and not being 100%"

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