



INTERNATIONAL CENTRE FOR POLITICAL VIOLENCE AND TERRORISM RESEARCH

A Centre of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies

Spot Report on the US Hostage Rescue in Somalia¹ 13 April 2009

Situation Overview

Somalia, a country in the Horn of Africa, is strategically bounded on its north side by the Gulf of Aden and on its eastern side by the Indian Ocean. The country has been without an effective central government since the 1990s. Poor living conditions, no livelihood prospects, and civil and internal conflicts have all provided the necessary conditions for Somalis to resort to piracy.



Figure 1 Map of Somalia (CIA world Fact Book Website)

According to the Annual Report of the International Maritime Bureau's Piracy Reporting Center, maritime vessels are at high risk for piracy and armed robbery in the waters off the Somali coast. Pirate attacks off the country's coast hit unprecedented levels in 2008 with 111 reported incidents and 42 vessels seized. The attacks indicated the increasing ability of pirates to sail further out to sea and carry out bolder attacks over great distances. The interim Somali

¹ Prepared by Diane Russel Ong Junio, Research Analyst, Email: isdiane@ntu.edu.sg

government has been largely incapable of responding to the piracy problem and this is seen as a factor that gave rise to the unprecedented rise of piracy attacks in the area.²

At present, there are at least 18 warships from the world's most powerful navies now operating in the Gulf of Aden to prevent piracy attacks. However, the pirates have been very skillful in outmaneuvering the authorities and some groups have even changed their tactics and areas of operations. Since January 2009, seven ships have been seized by the pirates, although there have been 10 times more attacks carried out compared to the same period last year. The fact that there are still incidents of attacks despite international naval cooperation in the area suggests that piracy in Somalia is still a growing industry. This spot report would look into one of the more recent pirate attacks in Somalia which involve the ship Maersk-Alabama, the hostage of its captain, and the hostage rescue operations carried out by the United States Navy.

The Pirates, Trends, and Tactics

United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon has said that there are two main piracy networks operating in Somalia and that they are based in the northeastern region of Puntland and the central Mudug region.³ The pirate networks are thought to have roots from the fishing communities in the northeastern and central coasts of Somalia and that the organization of the group is actually a reflection of Somali clan-based social structures.⁴ There is no information to be had on how many Somalis have turned to piracy but it cannot be denied that many poor and unemployed young Somalis see piracy as an easy way to earn good money.⁵

It is widely believed that the pirates have evolved from groups formed by local fishermen in the early 1990s to safeguard against illegal fishing and the dumping of toxic and industrial wastes in Somali waters by fleets from Europe and Asia. The groups were a sort of militia which would drive away or apprehend shipping vessels that encroach on Somalia's coastal waters. It was in the early 2000 that these groups reinvented themselves as pirates as they have got more sophisticated methods to capture ships and carry out attacks.



Figure 2 File photograph of Somali pirates (BBC News website)

An analysis of the pirate attacks carried out by Somali pirates show some distinct tactics and trends. Most of the recent attacks were carried out along the eastern and southern coast of Somalia but attacks could also take place in areas off the coasts of Kenya and Tanzania. As

² "Somalia confirmed as piracy capital", CNN, 16 January 2009, <http://edition.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/africa/01/16/pirates.year/index.html>

³ "UN: 2 piracy networks operating in Somalia", Associated Press, 18 March 2009.

http://www.google.com/hostednews/ap/article/ALeqM5jttFhr_LRiaRmv9t8ydOUPMQ56OgD970L5080

⁴ "UN: 2 piracy networks operating in Somalia", Associated Press, 18 March 2009.

http://www.google.com/hostednews/ap/article/ALeqM5jttFhr_LRiaRmv9t8ydOUPMQ56OgD970L5080

⁵ "RPT-Q&A-Who are the Somali pirates", Reuters, 12 April 2009, <http://www.alertnet.org/thenews/newsdesk/LC335689.htm>

pirates earned more ransom money, and gained more experience, the pirates reinvested in the business purchasing speedboats, tracking devices, communication devices, and more powerful weapons. It is also believed that the pirates are now using bigger and faster ships which let them conduct attacks further away from the coast. These ships could launch smaller boats to attack targeted ships- the pirates, armed with guns, would approach the target and simply try to climb on board.

There is no accurate information as to the total earnings of Somali pirates but it has been observed that ship owners have regularly opted to pay ransom. Earlier this year, more than US\$ 6 million was paid for the release of the Saudi supertanker the Sirius Star and the Ukrainian vessel MV Faina. Piracy attacks have forced shipping companies to shell out more money for insurance premiums to pay off the pirate's ransom demands. Another option would be for ship owners to spend more on fuel and take the long route around the Gulf of Aden to dodge the hijackers. Neither option is good for business and trade. The recent incidents of piracy in the region have further highlighted the risks and threats to the shipping and maritime industry.

Pirate Attack on the Maersk-Alabama and hostage of American national

On 8 April 2009, Moller-Maersk, a shipping company from Denmark announced that one of its vessels, the Maersk-Alabama was attacked by pirates 500 kilometers off the coast of Somali.⁶



Figure 3 File Photograph of the Maersk-Alabama container ship (BBC News website)

The container ship was sailing under a United States flag and had a crew of 20 headed by Captain Richard Philips. The ship was on its way to Mombasa, Kenya with a cargo of food aid when it was attacked.⁷ Capt. Philips was held hostage before his crew managed to regain control of the ship. One of the four pirates was captured by the crew but he was released after a failed hostage swap. The pirates took Capt. Philips with them aboard the ship's 28-foot lifeboat and drifted off into the Indian Ocean. There were reports that Capt. Philips offered himself as a hostage to the pirates to guarantee the safety of his crew.

The pirates were supposed to rendezvous with another group pirates and their hostages on board a German ship, the Hansa Stavanger, which was hijacked earlier this April, 400 miles off the coast of southern Somalia- the ship is said to have a crew of 24 people.⁸ There were reports that the pirates holding Capt. Philips want US\$2 million for his release.⁹ It is significant to note that Capt. Philips is the first American national held hostage by the Somali pirates.

⁶ "RPT-Maersk says its ship probably seized by pirates", Reuters, 8 April 2009, <http://www.alertnet.org/thenews/newsdesk/L8547375.htm>

⁷ "Source: Pirates repel sailors attempting to reach captain". CNN, 11 April 2009, <http://edition.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/africa/04/11/somalia.u.s.ship/index.html>

⁸ "Pirates want \$2 million for American hostage- source", Reuters, 10 April 2009, <http://www.alertnet.org/thenews/newsdesk/LA593382.htm>

⁹ Ibid

Rescue Efforts

A day after the incident, on 9 April 2009, the USS Bainbridge, a guided missile destroyer arrived on the scene to assist in the negotiations for the release of Capt. Philips. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) was also on hand to take part in the negotiations. The USS Bainbridge was able to get close to the lifeboat which had Capt. Philips and the four pirates on board. At one point, Capt. Philips tried to escape from his captors by jumping into the sea and swimming towards the warship but he did not get far and was recaptured.¹⁰

On 10 April 2009, US President Barack Obama authorized the military to use appropriate force if Capt. Philips is in immediate danger. Two more US Navy ships arrived in the scene- the USS Halyburton, a guided missile frigate, and the USS Boxer, an amphibious assault ship.



Figure 4 Photograph provided by the US Navy showing the USS Bainbridge approaching the lifeboat at the bottom right, where the hostage, Captain Richard Philips, and four pirates were (The Sydney Morning Herald)

Captain Richard Philips was safely rescued on 12 April 2009 at around 7:19 pm (12:19 pm ET) after US Navy Seals snipers on board the USS Bainbridge shot dead three of the four pirates holding him hostage.¹¹ The snipers decided to take action after seeing that one of the pirates had an AK-47 leveled against the hostage's back.¹² A fourth pirate, who was on board the USS Bainbridge to negotiate for Philips' release at the time the shots were fired, was arrested. The lifeboat was about 80 to 100 feet (25 to 30 meters) away from the USS Bainbridge, and was

¹⁰ "Pirates recapture US captain after escape bid", Reuters, 10 April 2009, <http://www.alertnet.org/thenews/newsdesk/N10451817.htm>

¹¹ "Hostage captain rescued; Navy snipers kill 3 pirates", CNN, 12 April 2009, <http://edition.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/africa/04/12/somalia.pirates/index.html>

¹² Ibid

being towed towards calmer waters, when the Navy Seals opened fire on the pirates.¹³ The lifeboat was about 20 miles off the Somali coast when the hostage rescue operations ended.¹⁴

Officials said that it is the first time in modern history that the United States had in custody a pirate who carried out an attack on a US citizen.¹⁵ It is not known whether the pirate would be prosecuted in the US or in Kenya but it was acknowledged that his case would be a sensitive issue.

Implications



Figure 5 File Photograph of Captain Richard Philips taken shortly after his rescue (CNN News)

The rescue of Captain Richard Philips from the hands of Somali pirates fueled calls from the international community to take more aggressive actions against the threat of piracy.¹⁶ Some of the measures proposed include the arming of merchant vessels and changes to the international law that would make it easier to pursue pirates and put them on trial.¹⁷ However arming crews would remain an unpopular option with shipping companies who are worried about liability or an arms race with the pirate groups.¹⁸ On the other hand, international legal agreements to fight piracy often involve questions on national jurisdiction and state sovereignty.

More significantly, the deaths of the pirates may have negative repercussions for maritime security in the region. Somali pirates threatened revenge over the deaths of their comrades killed by foreign troops.¹⁹ The latest hostage rescue operation by the US Navy, and the one undertaken by the French Navy last week, have resulted in the deaths of five pirates and many fear that these could result in future bloodsheds in the high seas. The pirates still hold about 17 captured vessels and 260 hostages, including nearly 100 Filipinos- the fate of these hostages is now in question, due to the increasingly tense circumstances brought about by the rescue of the American and French hostages.

Naval patrols off the coast of Somalia by some of the world's most powerful countries- the United States, Japan, China, France, and Germany to name a few- is not seen as enough deterrence for piracy attacks. The patrols are concentrated in specific areas in the region, mostly

¹³ "Q+A-How the US Navy ended Somali pirate drama", Reuters, 12 April 2009, <http://www.alertnet.org/thenews/newsdesk/N12334755.htm>

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ "Rescue off Somalia prompts calls for action", Reuters, 12 April 2009, <http://www.alertnet.org/thenews/newsdesk/N12352401.htm>

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ "Somali pirates vow revenge over comrades killings", Reuters, 12 April 2009, <http://www.alertnet.org/thenews/newsdesk/LC343356.htm>

in the Gulf of Aden, and while there have been an initial dip in the number of attacks in that area, pirates have increasingly moved their operations on the Indian Ocean. There are now rising opinions that the international community should shift its focus to the situation on the ground in Somalia to fight piracy.²⁰ Many within Somalia's fledgling government believe that "rampant piracy off Somalia can only be stopped with stability and security onshore, not by international navies patrolling large stretches of sea".²¹ More focus and resources should be provided for Somalia's national security forces and the government should be supported in its attempts to restore central rule. It is only by addressing the root causes of piracy, restoring order, and stability, that the threat could be effectively contained.

²⁰ "Interview: Somalia piracy must be stopped on land", Reuters, 12 April 2009, <http://www.alertnet.org/thenews/newsdesk/LC210272.htm>

²¹ Ibid