

PIRACY ON THE HIGH SEAS

Once there was time when modern day pirates jumped on board, demanded cash and jewellery and then sped off into the dark leaving a stunned crew and passengers to head on their way. Things have changed, especially off the coast of Somalia.

The situation there has become desperate as seized crew members are held to ransom in a failed state that's done little to stop this unsavoury trade and forced the international shipping community to pay out millions.

Over the last two months *Professional Skipper* has collected a considerable amount of information on hijacking incidents that affect international shipping. We take a particular interest in this subject because some New Zealanders regularly crew on ships passing through such troubled waters.

At a later stage, we may reveal more information from New Zealanders directly affected by these vagabonds of the high seas but meantime, the following summary provides a snapshot picture of what's been happening lately.

Off the coast of Somalia pirate attacks soared in the third quarter of the year totalling 83 out of the 199 in the first nine months of the year, said the International Maritime Bureau's (IMB) Piracy Reporting Centre.

"Pirates in the Gulf of Aden believe that they can operate with impunity in attacking vessels," stated IMB director, Pottengal Mukundan.

Pirates have hijacked 26 ships, taken 537 hostage and fired on a further 21 vessels in unsuccessful attempts. One crewman has been killed by gunfire and a rocket propelled grenade damaged the hull of a tanker causing a small spill.

Meanwhile Denmark's AP Moller-Maersk has amended its policy for vessels entering the Gulf of Aden and travelling off the coast of East Africa in light of the attacks.

A group statement says vessels without adequate speed or freeboard will, for the time being, avoid the Gulf of Aden and seek alternative routing south of the Cape of Good Hope and east of Madagascar.

"We believe that piracy in the Gulf of Aden is a threat to important international trade lanes and therefore an international security issue. It must be addressed by relevant authorities and the international community. It is not a problem that AP Moller-Maersk or the shipping industry can solve alone," says Soren Skou, partner and member of the executive board of AP Moller-Maersk.

International frustration on the subject is now so strong that warships cruising the area are fully prepared to use firepower when necessary.

An Indian frigate, *INS Tabar*, dispatched to protect the country's merchant fleet, sighted a pirate vessel. Indian officers said they spotted pirates moving on the deck with rocket propelled grenade launchers and automatic weapons.

"On repeated calls, the vessel's threatening response was that she would blow up the naval warship," the Indian Navy said in a statement.

INS Tabar retaliated in self defence and opened fire.

Fire broke out on the pirate vessel and explosions were heard, possibly due to exploding ammunition.

"From what we see in photographs the pirate vessel is completely destroyed," a senior officer said. Two speedboats were seen fleeing the sinking ship.

The situation really came to a head with the seizing of the massive bulk tanker, *Sirius Star*. Although there had been numerous other hijackings, what really raised international concern was the sheer audacity of this strike.

Seized in the Indian Ocean about 500 miles (800 kilometres) off the coast of Kenya, the *Sirius Star* is now thought to be anchored at the Somali pirate lair of Harardhere.

The super-tanker had a 25-strong crew, 19 from the Philippines, two from Britain, two from Poland, one Croatian and one Saudi.

And the German Navy announced that one of its frigates had foiled attacks on two ships in the Gulf of Aden, using a helicopter to chase off pirates who fled in their speedboats.

For the pirates who carry out the attacks, the allure is that of riches, the likes of which would be impossible to attain in their poverty-wracked homeland.

In September, Somali hijackers released a Japanese ship and its 21 member crew after a \$2 million ransom was paid three months after its capture.

The British Navy has also been involved. Pirates caught red handed after trying to hijack a cargo ship off Somalia made the mistake of firing on two Royal Navy assault craft packed with commandos armed with machineguns and SA80 rifles. Bad move!

Two Somali pirates in a Yemeni-registered fishing dhow were killed. A third pirate, believed to be a Yemeni, suffered injuries and subsequently died.

But the action hasn't only been confined to the Somali coast.

Over the past few weeks at least four incidents of ship boarding and robbery have been reported near Batu Berhenti in the east bound lane of the traffic separation scheme in the Singapore Strait. According to the pirate reporting centre ReCAAP, an Indonesian tug boat *Maju Daya 3* towing the barge *Marcopolo 188*, also registered in Singapore, was boarded close to the Indonesian waters. Five robbers armed with parangs (long knives) took personal belongings and cash off the crew before making their escape. No crew member was injured.

Back off Somalia, the Royal Navy ship *Cumberland*, which was involved in the shooting incident mentioned above, was supported by the Russian frigate *Neustrashimy* during the incident.

The Russian vessel had been sent to the area to help protect Russian cargo ships and their crews after Somali pirates hijacked *M/V FAINA* which was carrying a consignment of battle tanks. The captain died, and ship along with twenty crew, is still being held.

The UN has says piracy in the area is now out of control. 

