More military vessels dispatched to Somalia

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Piracy in the Gulf of Aden, off the coast of Somalia, has continued to hit the headlines following the hijacking of the MV Sirius Star supertanker, one of the largest ships at sea. The value of the oil cargo (estimated at $100 million) is equivalent to a quarter of Saudi Arabia's daily output. The ship was taken far south of Somali waters, some 450 nautical miles off the African coast.

The incident has been used to escalate the international naval intervention in the region. Many vessels patrol the Gulf of Aden already and the European Union is planning to send 10 more warships next month under a centralised British command.

Ships from India and Russia have moved into the area, and Japan is considering sending ships. Russia is also considering re-establishing its Cold War-era base in Aden, and has asked the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) in Somalia for permission to build a land base there.

Commentators have called for the arming of civilian vessels, the use of mercenaries, and even a naval blockade of the waterway. There has been an influx of mercenary outfits such as Blackwater Worldwide into the region, recognising the potentially lucrative market for security firms that are scaling back operations in Iraq.

The increased militarisation of the oil-rich region represents a major danger to the peoples of the region and the entire world. Warships from Britain, France, Germany, India, Malaysia, Russia and the United States are all currently operating in the region. Egypt has also expressed its willingness to get involved in policing the Somali coast. Piracy is affecting its revenue from ships passing through the Suez Canal. Three major shipping companies are said to be avoiding the route.

Russian UN Ambassador Vitaly Churkin has called for stronger measures. "Even harsher sanctions, harsher measures, harsher calls to the international community may be passed," he said recently. "It would give the possibility for more energetic actions by the naval forces of those countries, including Russia, that have dispatched their ships (to Somalia) for the fight against piracy."

The dangers posed by these developments were highlighted when an Indian frigate, INS Tabar, which was sent to escort Indian merchant ships in the region, sank what was said to be a Somali pirate "mother" ship off the coast of Oman on November 18. The Tabar, a Russian-built Krivak-III missile frigate, carries the Israeli Barak missile system and also the new Indian-Russian "BrahMos," the world's deadliest anti-ship missile.

It was revealed that the ship the Indian navy blew up was, in fact, a Thai fishing vessel, the Ekawat Nava 5, after one of its crew was found alive five days later. According to its owner, it had been hijacked by pirates earlier in the day and, after receiving a radio warning, he had notified the authorities. The Indian navy have justified their action on the grounds that they were fired upon after approaching the vessel.

India is looking to deploy more ships off Somalia, and has agreed docking arrangements with Oman. It is being encouraged by the US to play a leading role in policing the Indian Ocean region.

The potential for an international incident was highlighted on Friday when two British security guards and one Irish guard jumped overboard after a Singaporean tanker on which they were travelling was hijacked. They were later rescued by a German naval helicopter. Twenty-five Indian and two Bangladeshi crew members on board the chemical tanker, which is Liberian flagged, were taken hostage.

The prospect of the world's navies and an assortment of mercenary outfits taking action in the region raises the potential of further conflict in Somalia and possible clashes between the competing forces. At stake is control of one of the world's most vital sea lanes. Whichever country can claim to have dealt with the pirates will have gained a potential stranglehold over a significant part of world trade.

The issue of piracy initially hit the headlines following the late September hijacking of the MV Faina, a Ukrainian-registered ship that was carrying 33 Soviet-era tanks for delivery to Kenya.

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Until the Faina incident, the Combined Task Force 150 had been the main means of policing the region's waterways. This Djibouti-based force is a "counterterrorism" initiative whose main contributors are the US, Britain, France and Germany. It patrols the Gulf of Aden, Gulf of Oman, Arabian Sea, Red Sea, and Indian Ocean. Three warships from the force surrounded the Faina to ensure that its cargo did not find its way into the hands of Somalia's Islamist militia, which Washington alleges are associated with Al Qaeda and which the US is targeting as part of the "war on terror."

The European Union has also just begun its first-ever combined naval mission, replacing NATO in escorting ships carrying World Food Programme aid deliveries to Somalia. This represents a significant military escalation for the EU.

The sharp increase in piracy over the last year can be explained only by the changed conditions in Somalia itself. According to the International Maritime Bureau, at least 92 ships have been attacked off the Somali coast since January, of which 40 were hijacked.

Of those, 12 vessels and nearly 300 crew members are still in the hands of pirates. In the whole of 2007, there were 60 pirate attacks.

Ships are now held for months at a time, with protracted negotiations for millions of dollars with the owners taking place before the ships are eventually released. The criminal gangs have invested in more sophisticated weaponry and electronic equipment as well as using "mother ships"—larger vessels that can be used as a base for attacks over a much wider area.

Such large-scale criminal operations are closely tied to warlords and clan leaders in Somalia, many of them associated with the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) based in the capital, Mogadishu. The TFG was placed in power by the invasion of US-backed Ethiopian troops at the end of 2006. Its president, Abdullahi Yusuf Ahmed, comes from Puntland, an autonomous region in the north of Somalia. He was president of Puntland until 2004 and is closely associated with its current leaders. This is the area where much of the current pirate activity is based.

The London *Times* has reported from the fishing village of Eyl in Puntland, where its correspondent claims more than 220 hostages are currently held. It cites an academic from Puntland, Abdirahman Ibrahim, on the nature of the operations that have produced an economic boom in the area, with some $35 million made from piracy this year. "You can't have that much money coming in or going out without the top clan people being involved," says Ibrahim, referring to Abdullahi Yusuf's Majeerteen clan.

Abdullahi Yusuf recently made a surprise visit to Puntland, where he held meetings with his ally and president of Puntland, General Musa Nur Adde, to discuss the hijackings. He was accompanied by the Yemeni ambassador to Kenya. The two men warned that they would resort to military measures. This appears to be an attempt to rein in the piracy that now threatens to bring serious retaliation.

It is not clear what international criminal connections are behind the warlords and pirates operating off Somalia, but they must exist given the scale of the operations. According to the *Times*, the ransoms are paid into accounts in the United Arab Emirates and even Western Europe. There are also suggestions of middlemen based in Kenya.

The TFG now has little control on the ground beyond its own Ethiopian-protected bases. Yusuf admitted recently that the government was close to collapse, as insurgents now control most of the country and have advanced to the very edge of Mogadishu.

Clan leaders in Puntland have increasingly turned their attention to piracy as their main source of income. Apart from this activity, the economy of Puntland has been allowed to decline and coastguards who once policed the local sea lanes against piracy are no longer funded.

Ultimately, the conditions in Somalia are the responsibility of the US, which poured arms into this region during the Cold War and deployed tens of thousands of combat troops to Somalia in 1992 under the pretence of famine relief. These were driven out by the outraged population after the so-called "Black Hawk Down" incident. Since then, Washington has forged closer ties with the warlords it previously condemned. These warlords are well represented in the TFG government.

Somalia has now become the most devastated country in Africa, with conditions seriously worse than before the Ethiopian invasion. Over 10,000 people have been killed since January 2007, and more than 1 million people are internally displaced. The United Nations reports "generally high" acute malnutrition rates, and an under-five mortality rate of 145 per 1,000. Almost half of the population exists on less than $1 a day.

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