

Hijacking of US ship raises threat of intervention in Somalia

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As the hostage drama off the coast of Somalia continued into its second day Thursday, there were indications that the Obama administration may be preparing yet another military intervention, this time in the Horn of Africa.

The ongoing standoff between a small band of Somali pirates in a lifeboat and a US destroyer, which is being joined by other warships and planes, followed an unsuccessful attempt to hijack the 17,000-ton Maersk Alabama freighter, a US flag ship.

After four armed Somalis managed to scale the side of the ship and seize it, the 20-member crew put up resistance. According to reports, however, the ship's captain, Richard Phillips, volunteered to act as a hostage, going with the pirates on the ship's enclosed lifeboat in order to prevent any clash between them and his crew.

Reached by Reuters via satellite phone, one of the pirates sounded desperate. "We are surrounded by warships and don't have time to talk," he said. "Please pray for us."

The seizing of ships for ransom has been going on in the region for years and increased significantly in 2008, with the number of incidents off the coast of Somalia and in the Gulf of Aden climbing to 150. There are 16 ships currently being held for ransom.

The shipping firms themselves have treated the attacks as a nuisance that barely dents their profits. They have preferred to treat paying off pirates as a cost of doing business rather than arm their crews against them. Though often heavily armed, the pirates have killed no one thus far.

What makes this latest incident different, however, is that the ship is the first American vessel to be attacked by the pirates. It therefore provides the pretext for a militarist intervention and provokes a wave of jingoism in the media, sections of which are braying for retaliation.

The head of the US Central Command announced Thursday that the US military would be escalating its presence in the Horn of Africa over the next 48 hours. Speaking before an audience in Florida, Central Command chief Gen. David Petraeus declared, "We want to ensure that we have all the capability that might be needed over the course of the coming days." He provided no specific information on what this buildup entailed.

The *New York Daily News*, citing unnamed military sources, reported Thursday that "US military commanders have already prepared battle plans for ending the scourge of piracy on the high seas off Somalia if President Obama pulls the trigger."

According to the report, these plans involve attacks on seacoast towns and villages such as Eyl, Hobyo, Caluula and Haradheere, from which the pirates set sail.

The newspaper quoted Robert Oakley, the retired US ambassador who served as special envoy to Somalia under the first Bush and the Clinton administrations in the 1990s as saying that US special operations forces have prepared plans for mounting a land assault.

"Our special operations people have been itching to clean them up," he told the newspaper. "So far, no one has let them. They have plans on the table but are waiting for the green light."

While administration officials reported that President Barack Obama has received several briefings on the hostage drama, he has remained tight-lipped about it, rebuffing reporters' questions on Wednesday and Thursday.

Vice President Joseph Biden, however, insisted that the administration was working "around the clock" on the crisis.

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton commented on the hijacking attempt Wednesday, saying that the administration was "deeply concerned" and was "following it very closely."

Clinton went on to state, "Specifically, we are now focused on this particular act of piracy and the seizure of the ship that carries 21 American citizens. More generally, we think the world must come together to end the scourge of piracy."

The cable television news channels have devoted most of their coverage to the standoff, focusing on the "heroism" of the crew and questioning why the pirates cannot be stopped.

The *Wall Street Journal* editorial page, the most consistent voice of the Republican right, carried an editorial bearing the subhead, "Pirates are flourishing because the world is letting them," and goading Obama for failing to take decisive action.

"We don't advocate reverting to Roman methods (e.g., crucifixion) for dealing with pirates, though the Administration could apply the Stephen Decatur standard by bombing the Somali pirate city of Eyl," the editorial stated. "US law is clear that pirates who attack US flag ships deserve life in prison. But treating captured pirates as enemy combatants unworthy of Geneva Convention protections would help in cases where pirates attack foreign-flagged ships and international law is now more ambiguous."

Throwing in for good measure the recent arrests of American journalists in North Korea and Iran, the editorial suggested "a similar attitude" towards those countries—presumably including

military retaliation. It went on to reproach the administration for not rebuffing the Spanish judge Baltasar Garzon for agreeing to consider charging officials from the Bush administration for their role in making torture—including of Spanish citizens—a state policy of the US government.

“If the US government won’t protect American citizens from the legal anarchy of postmodern Europe, how can we expect it to protect American sailors from the premodern anarchy of Somalia, much less the tyrannies of Tehran and Pyongyang?” the *Journal* editorial concluded.

There is little doubt that if the hostage drama drags on, this type of criticism of the Obama administration for not taking decisive military action will only grow more strident and widespread.

What is ignored, or deliberately concealed, by both the American political establishment and the media, is Washington’s responsibility for creating the conditions in which piracy has flourished in Somalia. Hillary Clinton talks of a “scourge of piracy,” but the Somali people have for decades been the victims of the scourge of US imperialism.

Today, the country is one of the three poorest nations on the face of the planet. “Somalia is the site of the world’s worst humanitarian catastrophe,” the aid group Refugees International declared in a recent statement, pointing out that over 240,000 Somalis now live in squalid conditions in Dadaab, Kenya, the largest refugee camp in the world.

“Somalia is a nation in ruins, mired in one of the world’s most brutal armed conflicts,” Human Rights Watch stated. “Two long years of escalating bloodshed and destruction have devastated the country’s people and laid waste to its capital of Mogadishu.”

In a report released at the end of March, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs pointed to a desperate “humanitarian crisis in the country,” exacerbated by a drought that has left millions of people without access to drinkable water. “The water shortage has forced many people to walk long distances—up to 20km—while others are selling the remaining commodities they have to purchase water,” the agency said. Meanwhile, the UN’s appeal for humanitarian aid has been largely ignored by Washington and the other world powers, with only \$251 million raised, barely more than a quarter of the \$918 million requested.

The immediate cause of this catastrophe is the December 2006 invasion of Somalia organized by the US, using Ethiopian troops as its proxies, in order to overthrow a popular government formed by a movement known as the Union of Islamic Courts (UIC) on the basis of unfounded claims that its Islamist views somehow made it an ally of Al Qaeda.

In the ensuing popular resistance to the US-backed Ethiopian occupation, an estimated 16,000 civilians lost their lives, while another 1.2 million were forced from their homes. After Ethiopia pulled its troops out of Somalia last year, the Transitional Federal Government (TFG), the puppet regime of warlords installed at Washington’s behest, collapsed, and a former leader of the UIC was elected the country’s new president, apparently with the acquiescence of the US government.

This is only the latest episode in the long history of US intervention in Somalia, dating back to the 1970s and its support

for the brutal dictatorship of Siad Barre, whom Washington maintained as a counterweight to Soviet influence in neighboring Ethiopia. With the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Washington no longer needed Barre as a pawn in the Cold War. It withdrew its support, leading to the regime’s collapse and the descent of the country into clan-based civil war. The same pattern was seen in Afghanistan, with equally catastrophic results.

The subsequent US military intervention launched by the Republican administration of George H.W. Bush in 1992 and continued by the Democratic Clinton administration in 1993 under “humanitarian” pretenses only exacerbated these conflicts and deepened the suffering of the Somali people. US troops were forced out in 1993 after their attempt to kill a recalcitrant warlord led to the disastrous “Blackhawk Down” battle that claimed the lives of 18 American soldiers.

Thereafter, Somalia was once again abandoned to its fate, save for the 2006 invasion and sporadic US missile attacks.

While Washington and other major powers bemoan Somalia’s status as a failed state, major European companies have taken advantage of this status and its long, unpatrolled coastline to use the country as a dump for toxic waste for nearly 20 years. According to UN estimates, the cost of dumping these materials off Somalia is only \$2.50 per ton, compared to \$1,000 per ton for disposing of them in Europe. This waste has included radioactive uranium waste, lead, heavy metals like mercury and cadmium, and other chemical, industrial and medical wastes.

When the Asian tsunami struck in 2004, wave action churned up the waste and washed it as much as six miles inland. The effects on the health of the local population have been described as disastrous.

According to some accounts, the current wave of piracy began with fishermen attempting to stop foreign ships from offloading this deadly cargo.

Thus, the US armada—as well as the warships dispatched by a number of other powers, including Britain, Germany, India and China—are not patrolling the Somali coast to defend international law, which they have ignored when it comes to the ravaging of Somalia itself. The purpose of the US intervention is to assert American hegemony over the strategically important sea lanes of the Gulf of Aden, through which nearly 12 percent of the world’s oil is transported.

Any American military action in Somalia, whether justified in the name of suppressing piracy or, once again, providing humanitarian relief, will be conducted with this predatory imperialist aim.



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