

Obama administration ends Somali pirate standoff with lethal force

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13 April 2009

US special operations forces carried out a commando operation Sunday against Somali pirates holding the captain of a US freight vessel. The captain, Richard Phillips, was freed and military sharpshooters killed three of the Somalis.

Piracy has become increasingly common in the waters off the coast of Somalia—in the Indian Ocean and the Gulf of Aden—as the political and social situation in the country has deteriorated. However, this is the first hijacking involving a US-flagged vessel. Most of these incidents are resolved peacefully, and the ransom demanded by hostage-takers is seen by freight companies as a cost of doing business.

In this case, the hostage-taking was quickly transformed into a standoff between the pirates and the US military. As international media attention focused on the incident, the Obama administration saw it as an opportunity to reassert US military power and demonstrate Obama's own willingness to make the "tough decision" to use lethal force.

Despite statements by Obama praising Phillips, his personal safety was among the least important considerations motivating the US government. That the captain emerged at the end of the operation alive appears something of an accident. The administration had rejected negotiations that could have led to his peaceful release, opposing any solution to the standoff that did not involve killing or capturing the pirates.

The outcome will lead to an increase in violent confrontations in hijacking episodes, only heightening the danger to ship crews in the area. This fact was acknowledged by Vice Admiral William Gortney, head of US Navy Central Command, who said on Sunday that the action "could escalate violence in this part of the world."

On Sunday, White House and military officials were

at pains to make clear that the shoot-to-kill order against the Somali pirates came directly from Obama, who gave this authorization on Friday and again on Saturday. These assertions were in part a response to criticism directed at Obama from sections of the media, which charged the administration with reacting too slowly and cautiously against the pirates.

An editorial in the *Wall Street Journal* Saturday ("The Barbarian Coast") bayed for blood, insisting, "The US aircraft over the small pirate boat bobbing off the Horn of Africa are prevented from turning that boat into floating scrap only out of concern for the American hero of the moment, Captain Richard Phillips."

The newspaper, which has wholeheartedly supported US military operations that have killed hundreds of thousands of people, declared, "The Somali pirates holding Capt. Phillips and many other hostages succeed only because, like all criminals confronting the civilized world today, they have reduced the value of human life to zero." An earlier editorial goaded the administration for failing to take more decisive action, including military attacks on the Somali mainland.

In a column published in the *New York Times* on Saturday, Robert Kaplan warned that piracy could serve "as a platform for terrorists," and urged that the US augment its "sea-based, counterinsurgency component to deal with adversaries like Somali pirates and Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps Navy."

Discussion on the talk shows Sunday centered on why the US military seemed unable to counter the threat of piracy and whether it was necessary to take further military action in Somalia itself to deal with the problem.

The Obama administration had plans to launch operations on the Somali mainland in response to the piracy, according to several media reports, and these

plans may still go forward. According to the *Washington Post*, “On Saturday, residents of the Somali town of Harardhare, known as a pirate haven, reported that US military helicopters were buzzing overhead. A town elder, Salad Aden, said that one landed in the town and stayed for 10 minutes. Aden said a chopper was back overhead Sunday morning.”

Common to the media and political commentary both during and immediately after the hostage-taking is the absence of any discussion of the historical origins of the incident, and, in particular, the responsibility of Washington for the social catastrophe that has engulfed the country. Neither is there any discussion of the real geo-strategic interests that determine US policy in the region.

Somalia is currently among the world’s poorest countries, with an estimated per capita gross domestic product of \$600 a year. According to the World Bank, nearly three quarters of the population live on an income of less than \$2 a day. This social collapse is the product of a decades-long bloody encounter with European and American imperialism.

In the early 1970s the US supported the Ethiopian regime of Emperor Haile Selassie in its military clashes with Somalia, led since 1969 by the dictator Siad Barre. Following a military coup in Ethiopia that overthrew Selassie in 1975, the US switched sides, increasingly backing Somalia against the Soviet-allied Ethiopia.

Throughout the 1980s the US backed Barre’s increasingly murderous regime. The Somali port of Berbera became a critical military base for US operations in the Persian Gulf. As the Cold War came to an end, however, the importance of Somalia diminished, and the US withdrew its support for Barre. Somalia entered a period of prolonged civil war between different regions and factions.

In 1992 the US intervened directly in the country under the pretext of humanitarian aid, withdrawing in 1993 after the “Blackhawk Down” incident led to the death of 18 US soldiers.

Throughout the 1990s, as the country remained mired in violence and poverty, European companies seized the opportunity to use the long Somali coastline for dumping toxic waste. This toxic waste was churned up following the tsunami of December 2004, with devastating consequences for the population.

Somalis have also complained of widespread illegal

fishing by international vessels in its coastal waters. Piracy initially began as a protective measure against illegal fishing, but later became tied in with the political and financial interests of various war lords and criminal gangs that control parts of the country.

In 2006 the US once again intervened in the country, backing an invasion from neighboring Ethiopia, which overthrew a government formed by the Union of Islamic Courts. In the violence that followed the invasion, an estimated 16,000 civilians were killed and 1.2 million turned into refugees. The country remains fractured along regional and tribal lines.

While the population of Somalia is of little interest to the major powers, the waterways on two sides of the country are of critical geo-strategic importance. Somalia, on the Horn of Africa, is separated from Yemen on the Arabian Peninsula by the Gulf of Aden. About 11 percent of the world’s seaborne petroleum passes through the Gulf to the Red Sea and the Mediterranean. The country is also important because of its proximity to the Persian Gulf.

Over the past several years, military activity in the region has increased substantially, with all of the major powers participating. Naval warships from the US, Germany, France, China, Russia, Iran and many other countries patrol the area. French army forces conducted a raid on a ship last week that resulted in the death of one of the hostages and two of the hostage-takers.

Control over critical trade routes will become increasingly important as the global economic crisis intensifies. This particular incident of piracy could well become the occasion for a substantial increase in the US military presence in the Gulf of Aden and throughout the region.



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