

SOMALI PIRACY IN 2017

The pirates are back, but did they ever leave? Security specialist Ed Hill looks at the recent developments along the Somalian coast after a surge in hijackings this year.

AS SUMMER DRAWS TO A CLOSE AND yachting's Mediterranean season reaches its annual climax, many yachts begin their search for winter destinations and sunnier climates. The Middle East and islands in the Indian Ocean are some of the traditional favoured destinations during the winter months. However, the idyllic images that are often conjured up by these locations are tarnished with one particularly problem that in recent years has presented all seafarers transiting these regions with a serious headache.

For over a decade, ships have passed through these waters with the added fear of being attacked by Somali pirates. From 2010 to 2013 when piracy reached its peak, more than 100 ships were being hijacked per year and millions of dollars paid in ransom. The problem became so severe that a number of countries deployed warships to the region in a bid to suppress the rapidly escalating problem.

Additionally, ships were advised to employ private armed guards on board, a move that proved to be pivotal in cutting the number of attacks and responsible for the reduction in the amount of hijackings. With such a dramatic decline in the number of incidents and a complete cessation of hijackings, it would be easy to assume that Somali piracy had finally been eradicated.

Panic and hysteria

However, that dramatically changed in March this year when the hijacking of a Comoros-flagged oil tanker became the first vessel to be hijacked by Somali pirates in five years. By April 2017, Somali pirates had been responsible for five successful hijackings.

As panic and hysteria spread throughout the maritime community amidst fears of a return to the 'bad old days', questions were being raised regarding the root cause of this sudden resurgence of hijackings. One reason put forward centred on the considerable drawdown of naval operations in the region due to the decline in the number of piratical incidents. In December last year, NATO redeployed all of its warships from the region giving pirates greater openings for attacks. Moreover, with shipping companies consistently searching for ways to reduce costs, the decline in pirate activity resulted in significantly scaled down hiring of onboard security teams.

Another possible reason is the country itself. Somalia has long been regarded as a failed state and as the roots of maritime piracy tend to be borne as a result of problems on land, the recent upsurge in pirate attacks has once again brought the country under scrutiny. Maritime efforts were matched by simultaneous work being undertaken on the Somali mainland in a bid to resurrect a country that for many years has been ravaged by civil war. The country has been engulfed by clan warfare, which has had a major detrimental



effect on receiving and distributing incoming overseas aid.

Puntland

Maritime piracy has become synonymous with Somalia, particularly the coastal region of Puntland where piracy began and was subsequently allowed to flourish. An arid region of north east Somalia, Puntland is a semi-autonomous region, slightly more prosperous than the rest of Somalia but it still suffers from chronic poverty and systemic violence. It is where so-called Islamic State has established a foothold, and is also a base for the Islamist terror group, al-Shabaab. Although Puntland is a destination for many Somalis displaced by violence in the south, assassinations, ambushes, and suicide attacks continue to take place on a regular basis in the region.

In addition to its impoverished and lawless disposition, Puntland has recently been crippled with its worst famine in over six years. Described by International aid officials as one of the biggest humanitarian disasters since the Second World War, approximately 6 million people are said to be in need of urgent humanitarian support.

Outside influences were yet another cause. The demise of piracy has also encouraged the return of foreign fishing vessels to Somali waters. This has fuelled resentment amongst Puntland's coastal communities who desperately rely on fishing to feed their families. The absence of a credible Somali coastguard means that Somalia's territorial waters cannot effectively be policed. Consequently, some local fishermen feel the need to take the law into their own hands and a return to piracy is the answer.

Progress

Taken together it is perhaps not surprising that there has been an upsurge of pirate attacks. The recent resurgence in attacks provides a clear indication that the pirates never really went away. The deployment of warships to the region along with the widespread use of armed security teams provided a short-term fix to the piracy problem.

Although shrouded in poverty, Somalia has received significant overseas aid and has showed to be making some slight progress. However, internal fighting and a catastrophic famine hampers the progress of this this volatile, war-torn nation. A return to piracy was perhaps inevitable for a population that is desperately clinging on to its fragile survival.

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