

## **The Rise of Somali Piracy**

**By Walter S. Zapotoczny Jr.**

"Piracy, like murder," writes Philip Gosse in *The History of Piracy* "is one of the earliest of recorded human activities." The modern-day pirate has little in common with the romantic images promoted by Hollywood or of our imagination; they are not the cutlass-swinging marauders with an occasional trigger temper, an eye for a skirt, and a quest for gold. Most of today's pirates are organized gangs of poverty-striven young men living alongside busy shipping lanes who attack slow-moving ships that lumber by, rich pickings and perfect targets of opportunity. Perhaps the one place in the world that exemplifies the new pirate is off the coast of Somali.

Somali is a war-ravaged country where life is cheap and hope is rare. Each successful hijack by the pirates brings more young men into the village to seek their fortune at sea. With the chaotic state of Somalia and the lack of a central government, combined with Somalia's location at the Horn of Africa, conditions were ripe for the growth of piracy. Entire village now depends on the criminal economy. Hastily built hotels provide basic lodging for the pirates; new restaurants serve meals and send food to the ships, while traders provide fuel for the skiffs darting between the captured vessels. In an impoverished country where every public institution has crumbled, the pirates have become heroes in the steamy coastal dens they operate from because they are the only real business in town.

Piracy, of course, is not new to people of coastal areas. In *Piracy in the Ancient World* Henry A. Ormerod writes, "Throughout its history the Mediterranean has witnessed a constant struggle between civilized peoples dwelling on its coasts and the barbarians, between the peaceful trader using its highways and the pirate who infested the routes that he must follow." There are still pirates today and they became pirates for much the same reasons men in the past became pirates. The Greeks, who said of themselves that they did not eat all they wanted but all they had, and the Vikings who lived under a growing population sustained by diminishing farmland offer some reasons for ancient piracy. The pirates of the ancient Mediterranean all originated from lands that could not support them. The poorest of them may have been the savage men of the Balearic Islands. With no more weapons than their slings, they would rush down to hidden rafts and launch sudden attacks upon passing merchant ships. They naively believed that the sea, itself, was bringing to their barren island the means of survival.

The buccaneers of the Caribbean saw their meager livelihood of hunting cattle destroyed, leaving them no livelihood but the sea. Nor could the Barbary pirates be fed with the resources of the North African coast and the pirates of China, the Tanka, were forbidden to leave the ships on which they lived. All, at one time or another, faced deprivation if not starvation and all shared the second condition—sea-going expertise. Bradford argues that pirates, most simply put, are robbers at sea and by sea. By definition, they, like terrorists, hold "no commission or delegated authority from any sovereign or state empowering them to attack others."

Throughout the Elizabethan period and during the seventeenth century, British seaman and traders, pirates and privateers, sailed to the Mediterranean and Atlantic coasts in search of markets, booty, and profitable relations with allies. During their forays to the East, British vessels were sometimes seized by ships from North America and their crews abducted and enslaved. It is safe to conclude that piracy has been around for a long time. This brings us to today and the conditions in the Somalia, where considerable pirate activities take place.

Since the collapse of the central government in 1991, Somalia has been subject to widespread violence and instability. A transitional federal government was established in 2004 to guide the country through a transitional process to result in a new constitution and elections, planned for 2009. However, the transitional federal government remains fragile and lacks the capacity to provide services inside Somalia. General insecurity and inter and intra clan violence frequently occur throughout the country, and attacks and fighting between anti-government elements and transitional federal government and Ethiopian forces take place regularly in Mogadishu and in regions outside the capital.

Piracy is part and parcel of the overall security situation in Somalia. The years of being overrun by warlords and clan-based strife have returned after only a brief reprieve, which started when the Council of Islamic Courts took control of Mogadishu from the warlords in 2006. As the group advanced its position and threatened to sack the U.N. backed transitional federal government, Ethiopia intervened. Experts warned that Ethiopian troops had little chance of unseating the Islamic militias, but when Ethiopian forces crossed the border, their victory was as swift as it was surprising. Fighters from the Council of Islamic Courts fled Mogadishu, the capital, in a chaotic retreat. The internationally recognized government was able to move from the city of Baidoa to Mogadishu, and for the first time since the collapse of the Siad Barre dictatorship in 1991, there seemed a very real opportunity to put the country on the path toward legitimate governance and security.

The effort to seize that window of opportunity was supposed to include a neutral force of upwards of 7,600 African peacekeepers working under the auspices of the African Union. Uganda dispatched around 1,400 troops — an ineffective force well short of what had been envisioned. In April 2009, reasons for optimism were all but entirely gone when fighting on the streets of Mogadishu reached what the International Committee of the Red Cross called the worst levels in 15 years. In addition to the staggering death toll, the bloody battles have displaced an estimated 400,000 residents of Mogadishu.

A recent *Washington Times* article describes the challenges to relief organizations. This article provides us with a sense of the piracy problem in Somalia. With Somalia embroiled once again in the kind of devastating fighting that has racked the failed state in the Horn of Africa for more than 15 years, the work of humanitarian organizations has become both more dangerous and more important. Lately it has become more dangerous not only operating in the country, but actually moving relief supplies to Somalia, which done by sea, has become a deadly endeavor. In May 2007, a cargo ship carrying food for the U. N. World Food Program was attacked by pirates, and a guard killed in the processing of defending the ship.

The World Food Program has had difficulties with piracy off the coast of Somalia in the past. In 2005 the agency was forced to send food to the country by land, but trucks moving through Somalia inevitably face roadblocks set up by local militias. Long regarded as a dangerous region of the ocean, piracy again seems on the rise. The attacks are often carried out in international waters, with pirates later returning to Somali waters and finding shelter along the coast.

A pirate's life in Somalia isn't for everyone. However, nothing comes easily in one of the poorest and most unstable countries on Earth, and when you consider the lack of career options for Somalis on land, a pirate's life starts to look more than cushy by comparison. Hundreds of pirates are zipping around in simple fiberglass speedboats and usually armed with nothing more sophisticated than automatic rifles have turned the waters off East Africa into a terrifying gantlet for cargo vessels, oil tankers and even cruise ships sailing between Europe and Asia. The International Maritime Bureau says that at last count

42 ships have been hijacked off Somalia this year, and experts in neighboring Kenya estimate that Somali pirates have pocketed \$30 million in ransoms. While their countrymen suffer through another political crisis and the looming threat of famine, pirates are splashing hundred-dollar bills like play money around the nowhere towns of northern Somalia.

Residents say that the pirates are building houses, buying flashy cell phones and air-conditioned SUVs, gifting friends and relatives with hundreds and sometimes thousands of dollars and winning the attention of beautiful women, who seem to be flocking to pirate towns from miles around. Shopkeepers charge the pirates a premium for food and *khat*, a narcotic leaf that Somali men chew religiously. For years, the piracy trade in Somalia one way that desperate young men with guns could make a living in a desperately poor land. In recent months, however, with food prices soaring, the interim government careening toward collapse and local authorities powerless to intervene, hardly a day has gone by without an attempt to commandeer a ship.

"Socioeconomic status in Somalia is very bad right now, as we know, and this is one of the reasons pirates have turned to hijacking," said Cyrus Mody of the International Maritime Bureau, based in London. "There are a few people who are gaining a lot." In September 2008, pirates captured the world's attention by seizing the MV Faina, a Ukrainian ship ferrying tanks, grenade launchers and other weapons, reportedly to southern Sudan. In November came an even more brazen haul: the Saudi-owned Sirius Star supertanker, the biggest ship ever hijacked, loaded with \$100 million worth of oil. Both vessels are still being held for ransom.

The U.S. military and NATO have deployed warships to patrol the region, and China said this week that it would send a fleet to join the effort. Also this week, the U.N. Security Council authorized nations to chase pirates onto land, although U.S. military officials are skeptical of that tactic, arguing that pirates can easily blend into the local population. Many of the pirates are former fishermen who claim that they're retaliating against rich countries for years of illegal fishing and dumping in Somali waters, and a small portion of the ransoms is thought to go to local fishermen. According to the Central Intelligence Agency World Fact Book:

The International Maritime Bureau reports the territorial and offshore waters in the Gulf of Aden and Indian Ocean are high risk for piracy and armed robbery against ships; numerous vessels, including commercial shipping and pleasure craft, have been attacked and hijacked both at anchor and while underway; crew, passengers, and cargo are held for ransom.

Perhaps we are beginning to witness the future of piracy in the events playing out in the seas of the coast of Somalia. The attacks have taken place despite an increased multinational naval presence off the Somali coast, where most of the recent hijackings have taken place. The pirates are generally heavily armed, and travel in speedboats equipped with satellite phones and global positioning system equipment. To date, the pirates have mostly been demanding ransoms for captured ships, crews, and cargoes and the ransoms have grown higher as their prizes have become richer. If the pirates can seize prizes the size of oil tankers with impunity, it is likely that piracy will continue. People who are desperate, living by the coast and with access to arms and boats will see piracy as a way to change their situation. The Somali pirates of today have evolved, in an absence of a strong central government, to generate their own local economy. The most effective ways to deal with

piracy is to deal with the circumstances: lack of central government, high unemployment, and security.

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