

Somalian Piracy: An Insight

Somalia was created in 1960 when the British protectorate, British Somaliland, and the Italian colony of Italian Somaliland merged and, in 1970 President Siad Barre announced the formation of a "socialist state". The resulting close ties with the USSR brought little advantage other than ready access to weaponry to enable it, in 1977, to wage war on its neighbour, Ethiopia. Unfortunately, someone forgot to tell President Barre that Ethiopia was a proclaimed Marxist state and the aid that Somalia had expected from other socialist states failed to materialise and it was defeated. Fourteen years later, in 1991, the President was overthrown and the country reverted to its tribal origins - and clan warfare.

Years of tribal warfare (leading to the killing of thousands of men, women and children) were interspersed with numerous attempts to form some sort of a government and, in 2004, some progress was made - a new Government was established and a President appointed.

Militant Islam saw an opportunity and by 2006 it controlled a large area of the country - principally in the South - and despite fierce resistance from Government forces the Islamic Al-Shabab organisation made substantial territorial gains. By the end of 2009 Al-Shabab - now openly allied to al-Qaeda - had consolidated its position as the "ruling body" but, without an effective Parliament, Somalia again descended into lawlessness.

Today, the Somalian "Pirates of Puntland" pose the greatest threat to merchant seafarers since that posed by the U-boats of WW2. Operating from captured merchant ships converted into "mother ships" they roam far and wide across the Indian Ocean covering an area much too big to be effectively "policed" by the meagre naval forces sent to protect the merchantmen.

Buthow did it start?

For years the waters of the Indian Ocean have been recognised as one of the richest sources of fish and thousands of young Somalis eked out a living that enabled them to survive in a country that offered them little else. Soon, as fishing technology developed, these rich fishing grounds attracted the attention of fishermen from other nations many of whom paid scant attention to the supposed limitation of "territorial waters".

Hundreds of deep-sea fishing trawlers - equipped with nets and devices that enabled them to scoop tons of fish for storage on factory ships - invaded the area and, very soon, the relatively ill-equipped Somalis found that their catches were diminishing drastically. Further South, off the coast of Kenya the fishermen from Malindi found that they, too, were suffering lower and lower catches and soon the problem spread to other areas.

Few of the affected countries had adequate naval power to enable them to enforce their territorial claims but eventually, a few Somalis, driven to desperation launched a night attack on a Taiwanese fishing trawler and took it and its crew to a nearby anchorage.

Spurred by their success they repeated the operation and soon they were holding three trawlers and some twenty fishermen hostage.

Not surprisingly, the owners wanted the return of their valuable vessels - and, probably, the crew members -

so they appointed a negotiator and after weeks of wrangling a ransom (EXTREMELY modest by later standards) was paid and the ships were released. At about the same time reports were circulating that many ships on passage to and from the Indian Ocean and The Gulf of Aden were pumping sludge overboard as they transited the coast of Somalia and that this was having a deleterious effect on the fishing grounds. Later it was reported that some ships were deliberately dumping toxic waste in the same area and that this was effectively killing off the fish stocks and preventing replenishment.

One dark night a skiff full of armed Somalis boarded a tanker lying stopped off the coast, overpowered its meagre crew and instructed them to proceed to the inshore anchorage. A few weeks later a larger ransom was paid and the tanker proceeded on passage.

Thus, the self-styled "Somali Coastguard" was created and many local residents saw a vast improvement in their local "economy" with their new-found wealth contributing handsomely to their meagre living standards. The Somali fishermen recognised their potential to make huge sums of money at very little risk -and to serve their community at the same time - and soon they started to hi-jack ships indiscriminately - and their ransom demands escalated enormously. The illegal fishing by foreign flag trawlers ceased so other sources of income had to be found and passing merchantmen were easy prey.

The rest is history but a recent report outlined some of the positive and negative effects of the pirates economic success. Many locals complain of the presence of gangs of khat-smoking or drunken men whose wild spending has destabilised local prices and created even greater shortages. However, others welcome the spending power of the pirate gangs with local shopkeepers, and others benefitting from the huge sums of ransom money, by buying things like electricity generators, affording all-day powera hitherto untold luxury.

Fishermen in Kenya have recently reported a return to near-record catches (as have those fishing in Somali waters) but the foreign flag poachers have now moved to Tanzanian waters and there the catches are noticeably diminishing : Tanzania does not, as yet, have a pirate "coastguard" to take such effective action as its neighbour further north.

Somalia is awash with cheap, effective and lethal armaments with some coming from Yemen but the majority come from arms dealers in Somalia itself. Al-Qaeda is not averse to funding those who want to establish a pirate business and some years ago the late Osama bin-Laden used the news channel al-Jazeera to praise the pirates and to promise support. Today, there is a fear that some of the sophisticated weaponry supplied to the Libyan "liberation" forces will eventually find its way to this lawless country and then be available to the pirates. Many seafarers wonder how the khat-fired pirates acquired the skills to operate some of the sophisticated ships as "mother ships" and there are many who think that their crew members are co-operating with the pirates either through fear or for reward.

CRK 21.11.11