PIRATE ACTIVITY UPDATE

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For three years, the piracy scourge has been news within the maritime press, but would only become headline news in the mainstream media when a yacht was captured or possibly when a major national flagged ship is attacked. In 2010, pirates captured 1,181 seafarers and killed eight. Fifty-three ships were hijacked. Over the past four years, it is reported that 62 seafarers have died as a direct result of piracy in the Gulf of Aden and Indian Ocean.

Statistics from 2010 and so far in 2011 show that there have been no successful attacks on ships adhering to group transit times and speeds in the Gulf of Aden (GoA). Group transits are the most effective way for the limited number of warships to protect merchant shipping; however, the majority of attacks are now occurring far from the GoA, across the Indian Ocean. With only approximately 15 active warships patrolling such a vast area, merchant ships cannot be protected from pirate attack at all times.

Life has become more difficult for the pirates. The number of successful attacks in the past month is the lowest for many years and the number of ships held hostage is also at a low level. Some industry experts believe that the pirates will be using their forces with even more vigour with the monsoon lull about to end.

THE METHOD OF ATTACK

- The common method of pirate attack has been for two or more small high-speed (up to 25 knots) open boats/'skiffs', to approach from the stern.
- Pirates will usually close in on their target at speed and board the ship as quickly as possible. Once on board, the pirates will seek to capture the crew and take control of the bridge.
- Attacks during darkness are rare and, to date, have had a low success rate. Many successful attacks have occurred around first or last light.
- Prevailing weather and sea state conditions can influence the pirates' ability to operate. Wind strengths in excess of 18 knots and wave heights above 2 metres are considered sufficient to provide protection for all but the most vulnerable ships.
- Pirates frequently use small arms fire and rocket propelled grenades (RPGs) to intimidate masters of ships to reduce speed. Maintaining full speed has proven to be a good defence against pirates boarding.

A small sample of recent attacks within the last three months illustrate how attacks are conducted:

- A chemical tanker was chased by five pirates armed with AK-47s in a skiff doing 24 knots. The master increased speed, took evasive manoeuvres, sent a distress message and activated the water jet from the fire monitor. Two of the pirates climbed the ship's side, cut the razor wire and came on board while the other three pirates remained in the skiff. All crewmembers took shelter in the citadel. The pirates entered the bridge by breaking the glass and the

protecting bars. The crew remained in the citadel for 3.5 hours. The ship was later searched and all the pirates were found to have departed. No crewmembers were harmed.
- A tanker was chased by a mothership and two skiffs with four pirates in one skiff and 10 pirates in the other skiff. The pirates fired upon the tanker with RPGs and guns and attempted to board. The tanker increased speed, took evasive manoeuvres and activated the Ship Security Alert System (SSAS). The master, two crew and the unarmed security team remained on the bridge while all the other crewmembers retreated to the citadel. The ship managed to evade the boarding, but due to the continuous firing by the pirates, two crewmen sustained serious injuries.
- A container ship spotted a mothership and two skiffs at a distance of 6nm from the ship. The alarm was raised, speed increased and crew were placed on standby. When the skiffs closed to 2.5nm, the master ordered the crew into the safe room and activated the SSAS. The skiffs continued to chase the ship at a speed of around 20 knots. The master took evasive manoeuvres and headed the ship into the swell. The skiffs finally aborted the attempted attack.
- A mothership approached a bulk carrier and launched a skiff with three armed pirates. As the skiff came to a distance of 800 metres, the master fired rocket flares, all crew mustered in the citadel and armed guards were deployed. The pirates kept on chasing the ship and the armed guards fired warning shots when the skiff closed to a distance of 600 metres. The pirates aborted the attack.
- A small bulk carrier was pirated approximately 320nm north-east of the island of Socotra, and between 30 and 50 pirates boarded the ship. Within 24 hours of being taken, it was used to launch an attack on another ship using a skiff with five pirates. This attack was repelled by armed force.

WHAT HAPPENS FOLLOWING A SHIP'S CAPTURE BY PIRATES?

- Some or all of the crew may be restrained or forced to assist the pirates in operating the ship. The crew usually remain on the ship for the duration of the hijacking, although there is recent evidence that this is changing and some crew have been taken ashore.
- The ship will either be sailed back to a pirate port in Somalia or used in the Indian Ocean as a platform to launch attacks on other ships.
- The average time period to secure the release of a ship is about 200 days; sometimes it is a lot longer. One ship has been held captive for nearly one and half years.
- During the period of capture, there are recent reports of the crew being beaten and tortured, and subjected to inhumane conditions.
- Following release, crew have brought both physical and mental injury claims against their employer.

Further advice can be found on the MSC(HOA) website at: http://www.mschoa.org

WHAT CAN BE DONE TO AVOID A HIJACKING?

The most effective way of avoiding a hijacking is to remain outside of high-risk areas. However, given that the majority of the Indian Ocean has been designated high risk, this may not be practical. Without doubt, the single most important thing that ships can do is be prepared and maintain a vigilant lookout.

Certain flag states have reportedly agreed to deploy state troops on their flagged ships and more nations will likely follow this example. Although this may deter piracy on these flagged ships, it is not a policy that can be adopted for all ships, given the numbers of ships registered in Panama or Belize, for example.

An increasing number of ships now carry private security personnel, many of whom are armed. The increase in the use of armed security personnel defending ships has been mirrored by the increased level of violence employed by pirates when attacking ships and the treatment of crew following a successful hijack.

PREPARING THE SHIP AND CREW IN ADVANCE

Without blanket military protection from piracy in the Indian Ocean, it is important that all shipowners take steps to protect their ships and crews. It is well known that the most vulnerable ships are those with a low maximum speed, a low freeboard, and where ships and crews fail to adequately plan and implement protective measures in advance.

The IMO recently said that nearly 40% of ships transiting the high-risk areas were not complying with the Best Industry Management Practice Version 3 (BMP3); the military say that the level of non-compliant ship as approximately 20%. Between 17 January and 27 February 2011, the military found that of the ships transiting the GoA:

- 10% did not comply with BMP3
- 18% had not registered with the UKMTO or MSCHOA
- less than 20% had effective self-protection measures in place

Anecdotal evidence suggests that some companies are not prepared to even provide razor wire or flak jackets to the crew, even after the crews have requested them. Less than 20% of ships appear to be taking measures to harden their ships. If these statistics are correct, a significant number of shipowners are failing to take adequate precautions.

The latest version of Best Management Practices (BMP) should be used as a basic operational model when transiting high-risk areas. BMP version 4 (BMP4) has just been released and details can be found from the Standard Club website **http://www.standard-club.com/ProductsAndServices/ page.aspx?p=260**. In addition, information and intelligence for the master is absolutely necessary. He needs to be kept informed about where the mothers hips are operating and where the latest attacks have occurred. The company security officers should be responsible for passing this information to the master.

Higher-speed ships, 15 knots and above, are not necessarily safe from attack, but speed is an effective form of defence. Maintaining full sea speed and employing passive countermeasures have often been shown to be effective.

Some members have asked what precautions should be taken when navigating in the seas at the edges of the high-risk areas, for example in the southern Tanzanian, Comoros Islands or northern Mozambique waters. Successful attacks have occurred in these waters, so vigilance and precautionary measures should be taken.

FUTURE ACTION

It does not take a military person to see that the use of pirated mother hips will increase. With the crew remaining hostage on board, these ships are able to carry hundreds of armed pirates, carrying heavier armaments such as heavy calibre machine guns or even anti-aircraft guns. Naval reports confirm that the crews are being forced to operate the ships at gunpoint and any military approach leads to the captured crews being paraded on deck and threatened with execution if the forces do not withdraw.

How will the lightly armed security guards react on the attacked ship? Consider as an example, a medium-range tanker used as a mothership, with enough MDO fuel to supply the pirate skiffs and their mothers hips for years. What are the navies or armed response units going to do then? The capture of a fast-feeder container ship could provide a reasonable platform for the pirates to attack another ship directly. The pirates would then be able to board directly ships even with high freeboards, with dozens or more pirates at one time, use substantial fire power and not have to worry about the sea conditions. Even attacks at night could be easier – a floodlit ship would enable such an event. This scenario has already been partially played out and firefights have already taken place. We have already seen that the pirates are increasingly adaptable.

The use of mothers hips has increased the range of the pirates' activity. Attacks on shipping close to Indian and the Maldive Islands waters have occurred. These attacks may move towards Sri Lankan waters or further afield.

There have been some robust naval interventions, particularly when their own flagged ships are attacked. However, crew members have also been killed in the crossfire. Experts point out that storming a moving ship is fraught with difficulty and danger.

The recent threat by the pirates to take hostage seamen off the pirated ships and hold them ashore may complicate the situation even further.

The focus to date has been on the commercial costs incurred, and governments appear not to be concerned with the human cost. The United Nations' efforts through the IMO to galvanise action have failed to be effective. The real focus therefore for owners has to be on protecting their ships and crews.

Training the crew by preparing them in advance, ensuring that they have the resources to implement BMP4, and providing the additional support and intelligence, is still the best deterrent against piracy.

PIRACY ATTACKS IN OTHER REGIONS

Some piracy attacks continue to occur in the Malacca Straits and South China Seas. However after the GoA and Indian Ocean, the most dangerous waters are around the coasts of Nigeria, Benin and the Gulf of Guinea, which include the sea around Cameroon and Equatorial Guinea. Since December 2010, there have been 20 attacks off Benin, nine of which have occurred since June 2011. The pirates or armed gangs appear to be targeting diesel fuel tankers, so there is a suspicion that this is more related to theft than to hostage-taking.

Recent attacks have taken place on a large tanker 23 miles off Cotonou during ship-to-ship transfer operations, on a number of small tankers attacked off the Benin coast and on a small tanker 30 miles off Nigeria. The anchorages around Lagos, close to the Niger Delta/Port Harcourt and Cotonou remain high-risk areas. It is also noteworthy that the majority of attacks have taken place at night. Often the ship itself and crew are hijacked and then later released. It is also reported that these attacks are often carried out in a particularly violent manner.

Sensible precautions should also be taken and these should include the relevant advice contained in BMP4. Good piracy advice and up-to-date information can be also found at the Maritime Security review website: **http://www.marsecreview.com/**