

# Present-day Piracy

A few months ago I drew attention to the seizure of commercial vessels by armed groups from Somalia. Last year saw more than a hundred such attempts, a third ending in success for the pirates. There has since been a sharp rise in recorded incidents; United Nations data shows 81 attacks by Somali pirates between 1st January and 20th April 2009. Trade routes and aid supplies are threatened and insurance costs soaring at a time when most of the global economy is in recession.

One of the world's most dangerous shipping routes is the Gulf of Aden. Frequent attacks are mounted on commercial vessels bound for the Suez Canal or Indian Ocean by pirates originating from the Puntland area of Somalia, some even flying the classical fairytale skull-and-crossbones flag. But make no mistake: these modern-day pirates have at their disposal state-of-the-art equipment. Not only do they boast an impressive array of armaments, they also use the latest versions of GNSS, GIS and telecommunication equipment.

Vessels passing the Bab al Mandeb between the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden and those leaving ports along the Arabian Gulf bound for Europe and passing the Madiq Hurmuz are spotted by pirate accomplices who relay the information to primary bases and well-equipped headquarters in Puntland. There are even reports of tracking and tracing equipment being smuggled onboard vessels, enabling pirates to co-ordinate their hijacking operations. The outlaws currently operate from small boats along the coasts of Somalia and from pirate mother-ships, enabling them to attack vessels as far out as four hundred nautical miles from the coast, but prime areas of risk are the Gulf of Aden and up to 250 nautical miles off the Somali coast.

An international anti-piracy meeting attended by delegates from more than sixty nations in Malaysia has proposed that the United Nations play a role in co-ordinating an international force to combat Somali piracy. The initial resolution proposed by delegates and the European Union was diluted as a result of the two-day conference that brought together government, naval and shipping representatives, with the final statement reading as follows: 'The United Nations is invited to consider further the possibility of taking joint measures through the contact group on piracy off the coast of Somalia and its working groups to coordinate maritime force operations to suppress acts of piracy and armed robbery against ships off the coast of Somalia.'

It would appear easy enough to put a stop to these activities. Several warships patrol the area; satellites capture high-resolution pictures, radar systems sweep the seas, GNSS and every modern system is co-opted in. But it is very difficult to locate small vessels in a million square miles of ocean. Last May's Oceans'09 conference in Bremen (Germany) showed the solution may lie in global maritime surveillance by satellite-based Automatic Identification System (AIS) used by ships and Vessel Traffic Services (VTS) principally for identification and vessel location, perhaps in combination with equipment such as synthetic aperture radar (SAR). If, that is, some fundamental difficulties can be resolved concerning the use of space-based platforms; AIS was developed for the prevention of maritime collisions. Not to mention the minor detail of AIS simply being switched off, as fisheries sometimes do.