



Piracy off the Horn of Africa

Rawle O. King, R. Chuck Mason, Ronald O'Rourke, Christopher M. Blanchard, Lauren Ploch

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Pirate attacks in the waters off Somalia and the Horn of Africa, including those on U.S.-flagged vessels, have brought renewed international attention to the long-standing problem of maritime piracy. According to the International Maritime Bureau (IMB), at least 219 attacks occurred in the region in 2010, with 49 successful hijackings. Somali pirates have attacked ships in the Gulf of Aden, along Somalia's eastern coastline, and outward into the Indian Ocean. Using increasingly sophisticated tactics, these pirates now operate as far east as the Maldives in good weather, and as far south as the Mozambique Channel. Hostage taking for ransom has been a hallmark of Somali piracy, and the IMB reports that more hostages, over 1,180, were taken at sea in 2010 than any year since records began; over 86% of those were taken by Somali pirates.

The increase in pirate attacks off the Horn of Africa is directly linked to continuing insecurity and the absence of the rule of law in war-torn Somalia. The absence of a functioning central government there provides freedom of action for pirates and remains the single greatest challenge to regional security. The lack of law enforcement capacity creates a haven where pirates hold hostages during ransom negotiations that can last for months. Some allege that the absence of Somali coastal security authorities has allowed illegal international fishing and maritime dumping to go unchecked, which in turn has undermined coastal communities' economic prospects, providing economic or political motivation to some pirates. The apparent motive of most pirate groups, however, is profit, and piracy has proven to be lucrative. Somalia's "pirate economy" has grown substantially in the past two years, with ransoms now averaging more than \$5 million. These revenues may further exacerbate the ongoing conflict and undermine regional security.

The annual cost of piracy to the global economy ranges between \$7 and \$12 billion, by some estimates. The U.N Security Council has issued a series of resolutions since 2008 to facilitate an international response, which is coordinated by a multilateral Contact Group. The Council has authorized international navies to counter piracy both in Somali territorial waters and ashore, with the consent of Somalia's Transitional Federal Government (TFG), and has also authorized, as an exemption to the U.N. arms embargo on Somalia, support for the TFG security forces.

Counter-piracy patrols by multinational naval forces near Somalia are intended to compliment mariners' self-protection measures. Increased patrols and proactive efforts by ships have reduced attacks in the Gulf of Aden, but the U.N. Secretary-General warns that "while the effectiveness of naval disruption operations has increased and more pirates have been arrested and prosecuted, this has not stopped piracy. The trend of the increased levels of violence employed by the pirates as well as their expanding reach is disconcerting." Some suggest that a perception of impunity exists among pirates and financiers; nine out of ten Somali pirates apprehended by naval patrols are reportedly released because no jurisdiction is prepared to prosecute them.

The United States has sought to prevent, disrupt, and prosecute Somali piracy through a range of interagency and multilateral coordination and enforcement mechanisms. The Obama Administration has initiated a new "dual track" policy toward Somalia, where some contend that international efforts to build a credible central authority have failed. Congress has examined options to address piracy both diplomatically and militarily. Congress appropriates funding and provides oversight for policy initiatives with implications for piracy in the region, including maritime security assistance to regional governments, support to peacekeeping operations in Somalia, and funding for U.S. Navy operations.

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