

RE: RED SEA / GULF OF ADEN PIRACY

Simon's Analysis and Suggestions as @ July 2007

This is the result of my personal research into Red Sea piracy. The conclusions and strategy are mine based upon all the available details.

Links to good official web sources ...

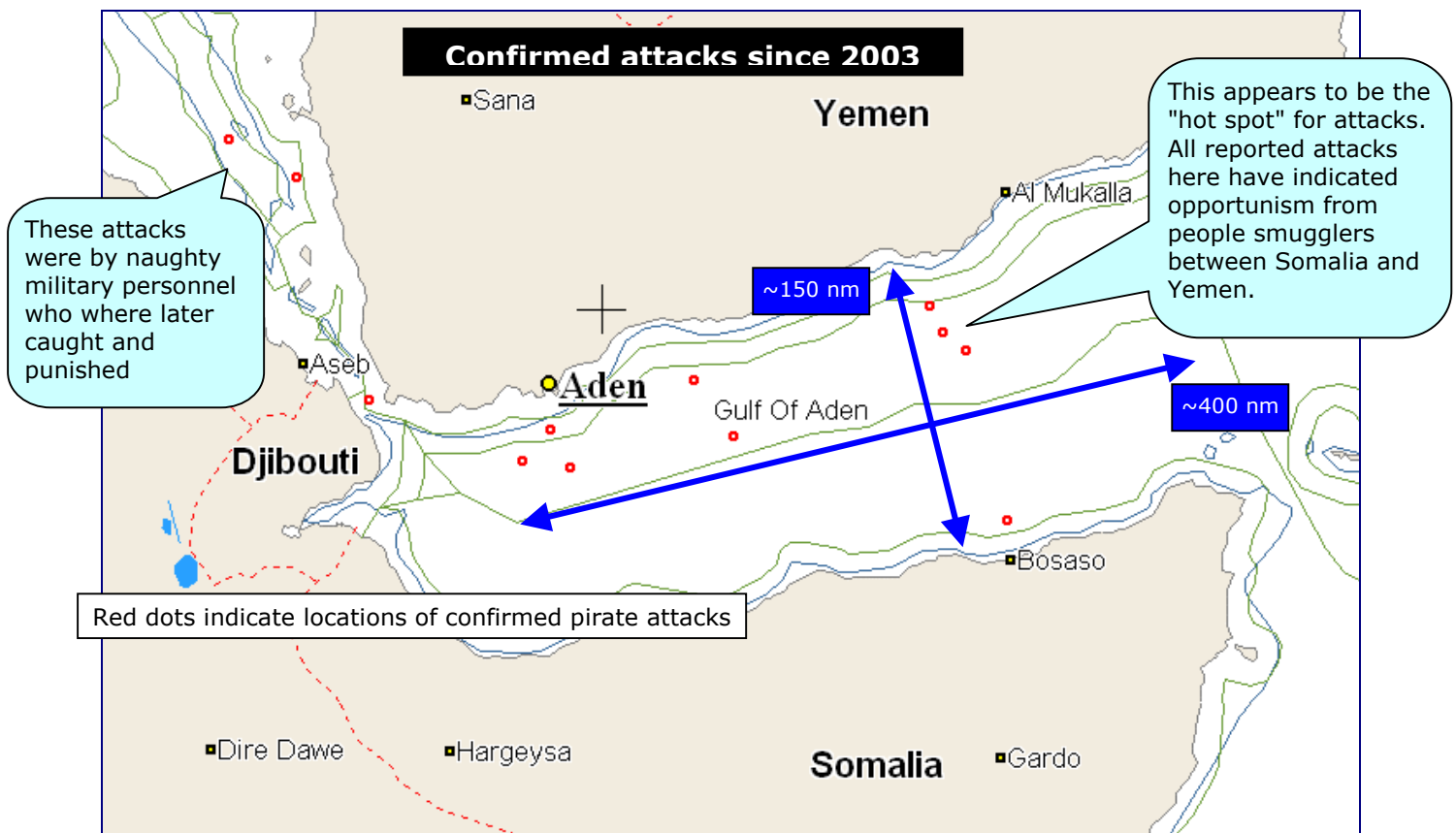
ICC Commercial Crime Services: <http://www.icc-ccs.org/main/index.php>

Imray: <http://www.imray.com>

Noonsite: <http://www.noonsite.com/General/Piracy/RedSea2007>

BRIEF

I believe there is a real threat of piracy which must be considered and planned for.



The situation can be broken into two areas: the Red Sea, and the Gulf of Aden (known as "Pirate Alley"). What can be expected in this regard differs markedly between these two areas:

Red Sea

Although there are many reports of incidents in the Red Sea, none have been confirmed as "piracy".

The incidents seem to be either:

1. paranoia - when an otherwise innocent fishing boat approaches, sometimes selling fish or asking for fuel etc;

2. opportunistic fishermen hoping for an easy mark – these can be ignored or easily out-bluffed;
3. military craft trying to "bully" for baksheesh – these too should be out-bluffed. Two separate military crew have been caught and punished following reports of their actions.

Gulf of Aden

This is where true piracy does occur. There have been 5 or 6 confirmed pirate attacks in the last five or six years, amongst an estimated 600 pleasure craft passing through the region – so about a 1% chance.

The attacks are always threatening and usually involve gunfire. Mostly gunfire is in the form of warning shots, although one confirmed incident involved automatic gunfire into the hull of the yacht (wounding two crew).

In one case, the boat owner was a retired US Marine and he returned fire (with his shotgun) – including shooting two pirates as they were boarding his yacht over the stern, and perhaps hitting another in the cockpit of pirate boat. In this case the pirates were scared off.

One case involved a small convoy of yachts. One of the yachts rammed a pirate boat mid-ships, while another was otherwise deterring attempts at being boarded. Eventually the pirates went away – possibly due to the imminent approach of a cargo vessel.

In all incidents in which the pirates got onboard, they stole small valuables (watches, wallets, phones etc) and carefully removed all radio equipment (mostly VHF). In some cases the boats were ransacked, however items such as laptops, stereos were not touched. In all such cases, the crew were not harmed in any way.

CONCLUSIONS & SUGGESTED STRATEGY

Pirate crews appeared ill-at-ease, in some cases were described as looking frightened or scared themselves.

Typically there is only one gun between them, the rest carry knives.

The distance off-shore does not appear to be a factor as most of the pirates seem to be involved in people smuggling from Somalia to Yemen.

The pirate craft are mostly described as 20 metre timber boats with inboards and appear capable of reaching speeds of 20-25 knots. The boats have tarps draped over the bows (probably concealing identification numbers), and have a distinct lack of any "tools of the trade" such as fishing nets. There is a belief that some operate from a "mothership". The craft do not appear to have any sophisticated equipment (RADAR etc, and possibly not even VHF).

Important note: the pirate boats are unconcerned about causing damage to your yacht when they come alongside.

Sailing Plan

My study and analysis of all confirmed attacks (and most of the unconfirmed incidents) results in the following personal conclusions (If I were captain of my own ship in these waters, this would be my strategy):

Travel through the danger zone at night, with no running lights, and travel mid-week (all confirmed attacks in the Gulf of Aden occurred on weekends).

(Note that I will have my portable AIS system onboard, so we will "see" any commercial vessels at night, and can be fairly confident that any military vessels will see us on RADAR)

It is considered highly unsafe to travel within 50 miles of shore, and certainly stay out of Somalian waters.

I am guessing that traveling mid-way down the Gulf of Aden at fastest speed is a good strategy. Being at maximum distance from land may remove the temptation for an opportunistic people smuggler to use too much fuel in pursuit.

There may be a benefit of traveling in a convoy, however this is no guarantee of safety (convoy of yachts have been attacked).

Convoy

Although this is the accepted method for traveling through "Pirate Alley" – I suspect that this makes little difference overall. On at least two confirmed attacks – the yachts were part of a convoy.

I would suggest that the illusion of safety with a convoy is simply a statistical certainty. IE, if 99% of boats are NOT attacked, and (say) 80% of boats travel in convoy – then most boats traveling in convoy will not be attacked – but this doesn't mean that traveling in convoy reduces (removes) the chance of attack!

Nevertheless, there is certainly no disadvantage to traveling in convoy.

Protective measures

All possible distress communication (except EPIRB) should be activated immediately – flares, VHF voice, DSC distress, INMARSAT distress etc. Certainly the best chance of avoiding a "real and imminent" danger is to catch the attention of a Coalition warship, or commercial tanker. (Coalition aircraft also monitor civilian marine VHF frequencies in this area).

Some evidence exists that strong resistance is effective in some cases, although individual cases may determine that aggression is not the wisest course of action. This should be the decision of the Captain (or owner?) and categorically decided and passed to all crew on-spec.

Preparations should certainly be made for the event of being boarded. Valuables should be EXTREMELY well hidden (as some boats were ransacked), with some desirables (cash, watches, phones, etc) left in easy reach as decoys (the thought being that they can quickly load up some "booty" then swiftly depart). I would certainly carry a spare (hidden) VHF radio – as the built-in radio is definitely going to be stolen if you're boarded. Perhaps a "dummy" radio can be loosely installed while transiting the Gulf of Aden as a decoy.

Although at least one confirmed attack had been defeated using guns – the topic of carrying guns onboard is a deeper issue than this single consideration!

However it does appear as if aggressively resisting can be an effective measure to prevent boarding (the pirates will wait for a "softer" target) – nevertheless this does increase a chance of the situation deteriorating.

Personally, I would have SEVERAL flare-guns onboard, with much "ammunition" (enough for all crew to be able to "practice" and get comfortable with firing the flare gun). A small caliber rifle could provide an advantage as it can be used while the pirate boat is still at a safe distance

(particularly if the pirates are in inflatables – as has been reported on a few occasions – but these are probably errant military personnel so you might not want to shoot at them).

The flare guns should be used immediately to fire into the air to bring attention to the area, then can be used to repel any boats by firing directly at the timber attack boats.

A supply of kerosene Molotov Cocktails have also been used as an effective defense/deterrent.

I would also get the "art department" (Henry and Lucian?) to make up a couple of dummy hand-held rocket launchers (ie, out of PVC tubing, cardboard and camouflage paint). I suspect that few aggressors would come close if a couple of sturdy looking crew are standing on deck holding rocket-launchers!!

Well, that's all for now! Thanks – it's been fun?

Simon Blundell
mail@simonblundell.com