

by Ted Osborn

Where have all the pirates gone?



ONLY A FEW MONTHS ago the radio, TV and press were full of stories about piracy off Somalia.

Incidents were coming thick and fast with attacks reported every day and two or three ships every week actually captured and their crews taken hostage. But nothing now seems to appear in the news.

What has happened?

The truth is that piracy off Somalia has actually got much worse: the number of incidents in the last six months is 350 per cent higher than in the same six months last year. The pirates have grown more sophisticated. They are better coordinated. They now have secure communications. They now operate over a wider area. They now use spies keeping watch along the coasts and in ports. The reason for lack of press reports is solely that the journalists have lost interest. They regard it as an everyday matter and no longer write about it.

Incidents are currently running at several each day with the pattern being the same for most: A 'mother-ship', usually a captured ocean-going fishing boat of 1,000 tonnes or more, launches a number of 30ft open boats (known locally as skiffs) capable of 20 knots. These approach the selected victim from each quarter and attempt to board simultaneously. On a big ship, boarding is achieved via grapnel ladders fired from a gun. On a smaller ship a conventional alloy ladder may be used. On a yacht the skiffs will simply come alongside. The pirates are not normally personally aggressive – although since most are high on the local drug *quat* anything can happen – but will always meet resistance with greater force. Since they may have machine guns, RPGs or grenades any attempts to use flares

or guns against them are likely to be futile and so are very strongly discouraged.

The object of the piracy is to capture the crew and take them ashore to be held for ransom – the going rate for which is said now to be £1,000,000 per person. Vessels and cargos are too difficult to sell and are normally left unharmed, unless, that is, the cargo is food or exceptionally valuable, in which case it is looted. The pirates are often now quite capable of sailing even a large ship and will normally use the ship itself to get the hostages ashore if it has not been previously disabled by the crew.

There is nothing published on how the ransom system works and who pays. Those who do know won't talk about it of course. Pay-up or else is the threat – and despite public statements from governments, ship-owners and insurance companies the money seems often to get paid. The average duration of capture is understood to be about 6 months with the hostages being treated quite well, especially the women, but since they are being held in one of the poorest countries in the world their conditions, clothing and food are very poor. We know nothing about what happens if ransom is not paid. All is quiet about that.

At the time of writing some 16 ships and one yacht are being held in Somalian ports with 227 crew members being held as hostages. Seriously attempted attacks are currently running at just under one per day.

The World Takes Action

The whole marine world is, of course, in turmoil over the matter. It is a terrible situation for the sailors concerned. World trade must continue so the professional

seaman has no alternative but to take the risk. We yachtsmen, of course, are only there for pleasure and do not have to go to the pirate area – and indeed are strongly advised by the powers-that-be not to go anywhere near.

The United Nations has passed several resolutions urging its member countries to take action and has modified international law to enable them to do so. The European Union has provided a fleet of warships (led by the British) to patrol in the most dangerous parts and intimidate the pirates away or capture them for trial and punishment. The standing NATO patrol in the area is active as well and several independent countries have also sent warships to assist.

The navy effort is coordinated by the British from the Joint Services HQ in Northwood, London and has achieved amazing cooperation. For the first time the most unlikely countries are working together to end the scourge – China, Japan, Russia, India, some of the former USSR countries and Korea are all working well with USA, NATO and the EU. Warships from more than 20 countries are now involved.

This may sound like a massive military presence with potential firepower which must be overwhelming, and so it is – but bear in mind that the area in which the pirates operate (see chartlet) is the whole North-West Indian Ocean, more than 2,000,000 square miles, and the warships can only spread themselves thinly. The terms of engagement are also such that naval vessels cannot attack before the pirates do without risking the opprobrium of sinking innocent fishermen and can't attack during or after a hi-jacking because of the risk to innocent

seamen. They do a very good best at intimidation but have their hands tied behind their backs when it comes to using the firepower available. Those few incidents where the navies have intervened forcibly have been disastrous: innocent lives, including those of yachtsmen, have been lost. So far this year, however, the navies have captured 107 pirates and probably prevented several hundreds of attacks.

Seamen Help Themselves

Seamen, of course, must help themselves as well and the navies have provided two means of doing this:

Firstly, a special route known as the Internationally Recommended Transit Corridor (IRTC) has been established through the most dangerous area and all ships and yachts are most strongly recommended to use it. The route is patrolled by warships ready and willing to go to your aid if attacked. While nothing can be guaranteed, a warship is always likely to be within VHF range if not actually visible and may be able to provide a helicopter within 15 minutes.

Secondly, a special information service has been set up to provide all ships and yachts with real-time information and advice and, most importantly, a place where mariners can sign in so that the navies know who is in the area of concern and where they are. Arrangements can then be made to monitor them and go to their assistance if needed.

If you are proposing a yacht passage through the area do give thought first to the very strong advice from the Royal Navy that it is not advisable. But if you insist then contact the following and provide basic information about your proposal:

Web: <http://www.mschoa.org>
Tel: +44(0) 192 395 8545
postmaster@mschoa.org

MSC-HOA stands for Maritime Security Centre – Horn of Africa. It is the primary control and planning centre for the anti-piracy operation based at Northwood and

run by the EU led by the Royal Navy. You will be asked to register by provision of basic information and will be asked to transfer to a secure web-site via a provided password, user-ID, etc. On this website you will be asked to provide detailed information concerning yacht and crew (copies of pro forma available from CA Office). This will give you access to certain maritime intelligence, news of latest alerts, details of the transit corridor as most recently updated, detailed transit guidance and general advice to skippers including what to do, and what not to do, if attacked. You will be able to register your proposed passage. If you are involved in an incident it should also be reported to this website in due course when convenient.

The general location of the transit corridor is shown in the attached chartlet. Please note that its position may be changed at any time but you will be kept up-to-date on its position via MSC-HOA. If chartered the transit corridor would look exactly like a ColReg Rule 10 Traffic Separation Scheme in that it is a 'dual carriageway' with a separation zone down the middle.

Big ships use the lanes as they do a TSS but yachts are being advised to keep in the separation zone down the middle – it is 2nm wide. Since the corridor is at present 500nm long this may be thought to be a navigational and steering challenge for yachts. It is permissible to stray into the lane to starboard but the yacht lane should then be regained as soon as possible. By following this procedure, yachts receive protection from the large ships either side and from warships patrolling the area. As an alternative for yachts quite unable to keep to their lane the area immediately outside the corridor to the north may be used – but keep as close as possible if you want to receive warship protection including VHF contact.

A yacht making the transit from, eg, Aden or Salalah may join the corridor some way from its start point. The most dangerous area is, at present, between 47°E - 49°E and yachts should join well before these longitudes are

reached. You should plan to cover as much of this region as possible at night.

Keep in Touch

Contact and registration with MSC-HOA should be made well in advance and certainly at least two weeks before arrival in the approaches to the general area. Once you arrive in the Red Sea (if going south) you should then contact the following well before reaching Bab al Mandeb. Yachts going north should follow the same principle: Register with MSC-HOA at least a few weeks before the passage, report to the following when the passage is imminent.

Email: ukmto@eim.ae
Phone: +971 505 523 215

This is the UK Marine Transport Office (UKMTO) which is in Dubai and will be your regular primary contact with the authorities during your passage. It is responsible for coordinating all transits through the area, passing on immediately current and important information, making up convoys or groups to travel together, receiving your passage and position reports and general liaison with the navies. They are a most helpful crew of UK people dedicated to help you through the area and keep out of trouble. You don't have to be British to use this service – they will help all seamen, but if you prefer to contact a US organisation which is undertaking similar work you can contact:

Email: marlo.bahrein@me.navy.mil
Phone: +973 3940 1395

The UKMTO groups ships daily for transit through the area. These proceed at various speeds and timings between 10 knots and 18 knots (above this speed the pirates can't catch you and give up). Yachts, of course, cannot reach these speeds and are being put together into small groups of 3 to 5 for transit when feasible. As anyone who has organised a CA cruise-in-company will know, larger groups of yachts than this cannot be kept together. The object of putting vessels into groups is mutual support and the deterrence of numbers. It may be that your best chance of joining a group

without delay is at Djibouti, Aden or Salalah. You will be asked to report daily during your passage, about noon, giving your position, course, speed and any revised ETAs. Additionally you will be asked to report when entering and leaving the IRTC secured corridor. UKMTO will keep the navies informed of your whereabouts and warships may well contact you directly from time to time.

It is stressed that if you do not register with MSC-HOA, report your positions regularly to UKMTO or keep to the recommended routes the navies will not know you are there or where you are and will not be able to come to your assistance. Because of the low speed of most yachts they may even think that you are a pirate waiting for trade.

On Passage

Preparations for this passage should be similar to those for any other lengthy ocean voyage, paying particular attention to the engine, radios, sat-phones, fuel and batteries. You should be prepared to transit the entire corridor at maximum speed under motor or motor-sail. Additional supplies of water-purification tablets, medical supplies and vitamin supplements may be useful in the event that you are unfortunate enough to be pirated.

Mental preparation for attack is essential, especially continuous vigilance when in the area. An early call to UKMTO is recommended if suspicions are aroused by activity among local boats, even if you are not certain, since the potential arrival of the military (either by sea or air) may cause an impending attack to be called off. A VHF call to a warship (even if you can't see one) may have the same effect.

A continuous listening watch should be kept on all of VHF Ch 16, 72 (for Marine Advisory calls from naval vessels) and 8 (Naval communications channel in the area) if possible. If the worst happens and you have to put out a Mayday then do so by all usual means. If you cannot get out a Mayday then someone else in your sailing

group should see the incident and can put out the Mayday for you. The number of warships in the IRTC and their patrol spacing is such that there is every chance that assistance will be quickly available. Unless actually being attacked and thus giving a Mayday call, or absolutely certain a warship is within reach, do not give your position in Lat and Long on VHF. The pirates could well overhear.

Radio transmissions during the passage should be minimised to essentials only although a discreet call to one of the official telephone numbers via sat-phone, if you have one, may provide useful warning of suspicious activity. Provision of a dedicated HF or MF channel for the region is still under consideration.

Advice concerning Class B transmitting yacht AIS is also still developing but is currently to leave it on in the Gulf of Aden area, so that the warships know where you are, and off when further afield unless you know of military activity in the vicinity. MSC-HOA or UKMTO will give you latest advice. If attacked and you have time you should ensure that AIS-B is on since it will help the navy to find you. A receive only AIS may be left operating but it should be borne in mind that it may be misleading since other vessels may have switched off their own transmitters.

A 406 EPIRB, PLB or SART are emergency devices intended specifically for saving life and will quickly draw the attention of the authorities to you – although a SART signal may well also be picked up on the pirate radar.

Yacht radar may be kept on but an RTE should be switched off unless actually in danger of collision. Whether a passive radar reflector should continue to be flown is still a matter for resolution. It is essential that the ColRegs are followed at all times because of the large number of other vessels likely to be in the area: this includes keeping navigation lights on at night – although some people regard this latter advice as controversial.

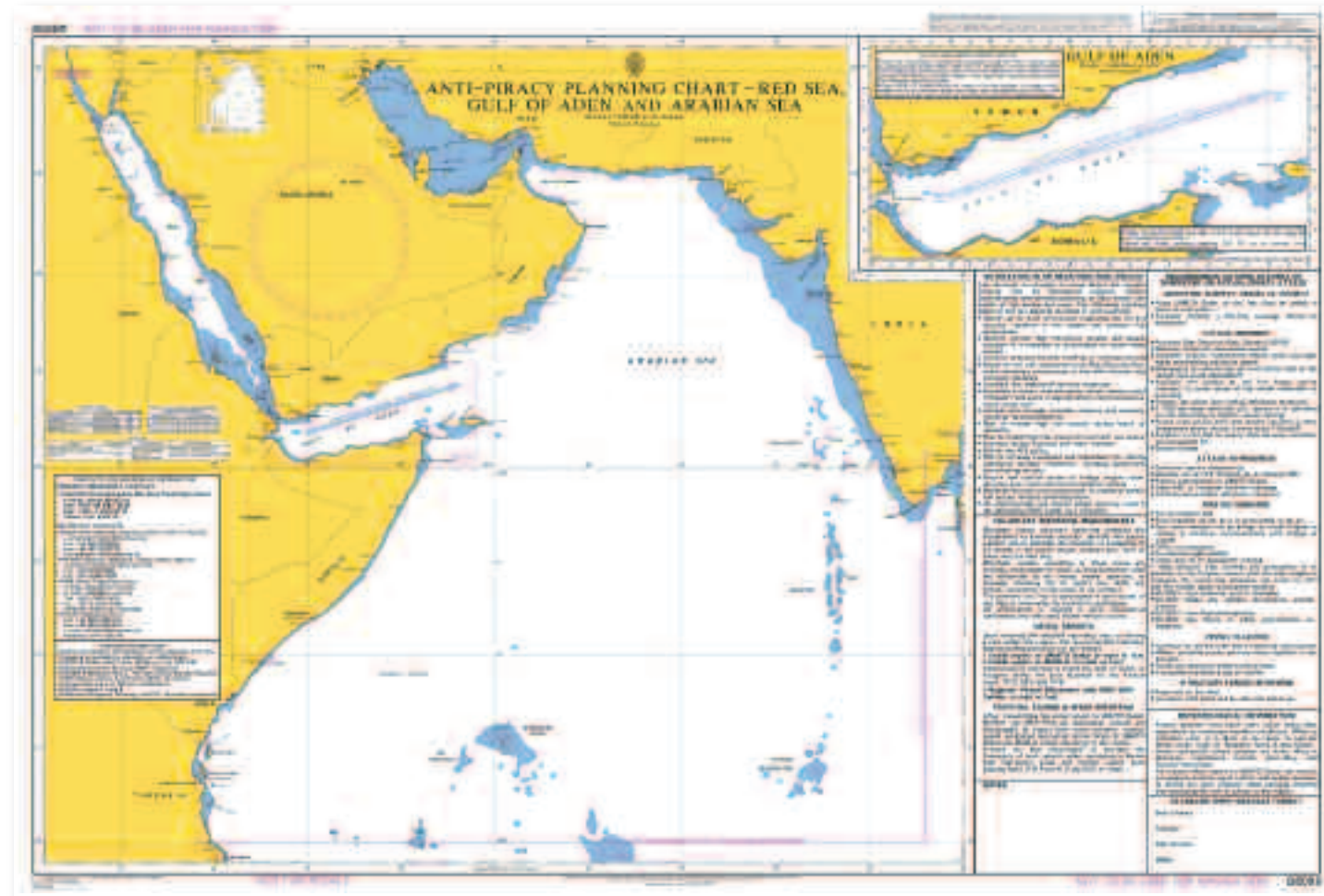
If the Worst Happens

Experience shows that the time between first sighting a pirate and start of an attack may be as little as 5 minutes but that achieving a delay of 15 minutes may give warships time to react by sending a helicopter. This delay can sometimes be achieved by evasion manoeuvres. If attacked and if feasible a Mayday signal should be transmitted using every available means with confirmation to the navy on VHF Channel 8. Most attacks take place at dusk or dawn – just the time when it is most difficult to distinguish between a pirate and an innocent fishing boat. The following advice if actually attacked and boarded by pirates is drawn from official sources:

- Try to remain calm
- Entire crew to stay together as far as practicable
- Offer no resistance (the chances are that the pirates are more numerous, younger and fitter than you are)
- Co-operate with the pirates (they normally don't mean you personal harm since it would reduce your value as a hostage)
- Do not use firearms, even if available (this will result in escalation of the worst sort)
- Do not use flares or other pyrotechnics (escalation again)
- Do not use flashlight photography (may be interpreted as gun-fire by pirates and by any military on their way)

If the navy arrives (by sea or helicopter) do exactly as they tell you – hopefully your radio is still open. If they board you, unless otherwise directed:

- keep low on the deck, cover your head with both hands, ensuring that they are empty and visible
- Be prepared to give status and identity so they can differentiate you from the pirates



- Follow instructions from military personnel without hesitation
- Remember to make a follow-up report to MSC-HOA

The Cruising Association, represented by Ted Osborn, is working through the International Sailing Federation in a small group of yachting representatives co-operating closely with MSC-HOA in development of strategies for yachts in this matter. We wish to thank all parties, including particularly the British Royal Navy, for their considerable concern and advice.



http://www.iccs.org/