



INTERGRATED MARINE SECURITY SOLUTIONS

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Pirates intensify Indian Ocean rampage

By Jean-Marc Mojon

Nairobi - Somali pirates seized ships from France, Britain, Germany, Taiwan and Yemen in the worst spate of hijackings in months, defying the world's naval powers by prowling further out in the Indian Ocean.

Ransom-hunting pirates equipped with skiffs, guns and grapnels took five ships in 48 hours, the two latest sea-jackings coming yesterday, and targeting a British cargo ship and a Taiwanese fishing vessel.

"There were two more hijackings today. There is one Italian-operated British-owned ship and a Taiwanese vessel near the Seychelles," said the official.

Ecoterra International, an environmental NGO closely monitoring illegal marine activities in the region, also reported yesterday that a French-flagged yacht with at least four crew had been captured on Saturday.

"The abducted yacht is currently sailing with eight knots towards the Somali Puntland coast. Local marine observers stated that the attack was reportedly launched from a captured Yemeni fishing vessel," Ecoterra said in a statement.

Hundreds of ransom-hunting Somali pirates - armed with machineguns, RPGs and grappling hooks - have hijacked dozens of ships over the past year, mostly merchant vessels plying one of the world's busiest maritime trade routes.

They operate from skiffs towed by pirate "mother ships", which are often hijacked fishing vessels. Last year, their haul included a Ukrainian cargo ship loaded with combat tanks, and a 330-metre Saudi crude carrier.

More than 130 attacks, including close to 50 successful hijackings, were reported in 2008, spurring the international community into joint naval action.

It is not the first time French yachts have fallen prey to pirates, and France has shown itself ready to intervene in the past. On September 15, French special forces stormed the Carre d'As, a yacht carrying a retired French couple captured two weeks earlier.

The number of attacks by ransom-seeking Somali pirates and their success rate had dipped since the start of the year, owing to an increased international naval presence in the Gulf of Aden and unfavourable seas.

But some pirate groups have ventured far into the Indian Ocean, southeast of Somalia, to target ships further out at sea, away from heavily patrolled shipping corridors. The latest spate of hijackings and releases brings to at least 17 the number of ships currently in pirate hands, and to more than 250 the number of hostages.

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