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Somali pirates seize US cargo ship with 20 Americans on board

An American-operated container ship and its entire 20-member US crew were hijacked by Somali pirates early on Wednesday.

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Maersk Alabama ship has been hijacked by Somalia pirates with 20 crew members aboard while sailing from Salalah in Oman to the Kenyan port of Mombassa via Djibouti Photo: AP

The Danish-owned and US-flagged 17,000-tonne Maersk Alabama, was seized as it passed 400 miles north-east of Mogadishu. Its immediate destination was not known.

The brazen attack took place despite the presence of a multi-national naval task force patrolling the waters off Somalia to deter pirates.

The incident is likely to be hugely embarrassing for the United States, which has warships involved in the patrols, and may spur the piracy problem to a whole new level of confrontation

"A US-flagged and Danish owned container vessel reported that it had been boarded by pirates at 730am local time today," said Lt Stephanie Murdock, spokesman for the US Navy's Fifth Fleet, based in Bahrain.

"The closest US Navy vessel which could have assisted was more than 300 nautical miles away. I cannot yet confirm the nationalities of the crew."

Leslie Edwards, a British-based security specialist who has advised on a number Indian Ocean ship hijacks, said: "As far as we know, this is the first time that US citizens have been taken in this fashion, and certainly in anything like these numbers.

"It may dramatically change the dynamic of the whole piracy problem and how to deal with it. The big question is whether the US will stand by and allow a crew of US citizens to be held for two or three months in the full glare of the world media. That would be a difficult test for President Barack Obama."

In a statement released from its head office in Denmark, Maersk confirmed the hijacking and said that the 20 crew members were "US nationals".

Andrew Mwangura of the Seafarers' Assistance Programme in the Kenyan port city of Mombasa said, "We have been told the crew are Americans and that they are safe".

The raid was the sixth successful hijacking in four days by pirates operating in the lawless waters off Somalia.

A British-owned cargo ship, the Malaspina Castle, and her mostly Bulgarian crew of 24 were hijacked on Monday.

A former oceanographic research ship converted into a luxury dive boat was taken late last week just hours after its party of British tourists had disembarked in an outlying atoll in the Seychelles.

French officials said on Tuesday that they are monitoring the whereabouts of a yacht seized with five people onboard, including a three-year-old boy.

An international naval task force, including British warships, was deployed to patrol the waters off Somalia since late last year in a bid to bring an end to the pirate crisis.

During 2008, the Somali gunmen raided more than 130 vessels, mostly in the Gulf of Aden, resulting in 50 successful hijackings and a multi-million pound windfall for the pirates.

But many of the pirate teams are now venturing much further south, away from their usual hunting grounds north of Somalia and closer to the Indian Ocean islands of the Seychelles and Comoros.