

Pirate attacks at sea getting bigger and bolder, says IMB report

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Pirate attacks on the world's seas totalled 266 in the first six months of 2011, up from 196 incidents in the same period last year, the International Chamber of Commerce (ICC) International Maritime Bureau's (IMB) Piracy Reporting Centre (PRC) revealed today.

More than 60% of the attacks were by Somali pirates, a majority of which were in the Arabian Sea area said the report, Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships. As of 30 June, Somali pirates were holding 20 vessels and 420 crew, and demanding ransoms of millions of dollars for their release.

"In the last six months, Somali pirates attacked more vessels than ever before and they're taking higher risks," said IMB Director Pottengal Mukundan. . "This June, for the first time, pirates fired on ships in rough seas in the Indian Ocean during the monsoon season. In the past, they would have stayed away in such difficult conditions. Masters should remain vigilant."

In the first six months, many of the attacks have been east and north-east of the Gulf of Aden, an area frequented by crude oil tankers sailing from the Arabian Gulf, as well as other traffic sailing into the Gulf of Aden. Since 20 May there have been 14 vessels attacked in the Southern Red Sea. "It is necessary that shipboard protection measures are in place as they sail through this area," said Mr Mukundan.

But although Somali pirates are more active – 163 attacks this year up from 100 in the first six months of 2010 – they managed to hijack fewer ships, just 21 in the first half of 2011 compared with 27 in the same period last year. This, the report says, is both thanks to increased ship hardening and to the actions of international naval forces to disrupt pirate groups off the east coast of Africa.

"It is vital that this naval presence be sustained or increased," the report asserts.

Somali pirates took 361 sailors hostage and kidnapped 13 in the first six months of 2011. Worldwide, 495 seafarers were taken hostage. Pirates killed seven people and injured 39. Ninety-nine vessels were boarded, 76 fired upon and 62 thwarted attacks were reported.

Ships, including oil and chemical tankers, are increasingly being attacked with automatic weapons and rocket propelled grenade launchers. Whereas five years ago pirates were just as likely to brandish a knife as a gun, this year guns were used in 160 attacks and knives in 35.

A surge in particularly violent and highly organized attacks has hit the coast of West Africa this year, says IMB's piracy report, listing 12 attacks on tankers off Benin since March, an area where no incidents were reported in 2010. Five vessels were hijacked and forced to sail to unknown locations, where pirates ransacked and stole the vessel's equipment, and part of their product oil cargoes. Six more tankers were boarded, mainly in violent armed robbery style attacks, and one attempted attack was reported.

In neighbouring Nigeria, the IMB Piracy Reporting Centre was informed of three boardings, two vessels being fired upon, and one attempted attack. The crew were beaten and threatened. Ship's equipment and crew's personal effects were stolen. But IMB says that in reality, the seas around Nigeria are more dan-

gerous than the official reports suggest. The organization is aware of at least 11 other incidents that were not reported to the Piracy Reporting Centre by ships' masters or owners.

Overall, 50 incidents were recorded for Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore Straits and the South China Seas in the first two quarters of 2011. Three tugs were hijacked by armed pirates and 41 vessels were boarded.

The IMB PRC is the only manned centre to receive reports of pirate attacks 24 hours a day from across the globe. IMB strongly urges all shipmasters and owners to report all actual, attempted and suspected piracy and armed robbery incidents to the IMB Piracy Reporting Centre. This first step in the response chain is vital to ensuring that adequate resources are allocated by authorities to tackle piracy. Transparent statistics from an independent, non-political, international organization can act as a catalyst to achieve this goal.

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