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3. Piracy: the quest for that elusive solution

What deterrents work against piracy? There is scepticism about the effectiveness of many so-called solutions, underwriters at Lloyd's and the International Underwriting Association heard recently in a hard-hitting presentation from one expert, Capt John L David, of the London consultancy Marine Professionals.

The Maersk Alabama, a big, fast, high sided container vessel, has been attacked twice off Somalia; during the second attack, the ship had a private security detachment on board and there was a fire fight between them and the pirates. This was despite the presence of acoustic discs, costing about \$30,000 each, which boom out loud music in an attempt to make the atmosphere unbearable for invaders. It was admitted that the noise did little to repel the attackers, but the bullets were far more effective. The lesson according to the advocates of arming vessels, in one way or another, was that "Lead beats Loud", though Capt John expressed his continued doubts about having guns on merchant vessels.

One of the crew on the ship during the first attack is suing Maersk, claiming the ship was an unsafe workplace.

Capt John reminded his audiences that in 2009 there were 406 attacks worldwide, a 40% increase on the previous year. There were 1,052 crew hostages (867 related to attacks from Somalia) and copycatting was growing, with the number of seizures up 30% off South and Central America. He contrasted the international reaction to the maritime menace with the global outcry which would erupt if a jumbo jet was hijacked.

At the time of speaking, there had been "only" nine assaults since January 2010 in the 1,100 mile long corridor including the Gulf of Aden, but there were currently 130 hostages held from six ships. Violence was escalating, with two masters and three crew members killed in the last six months.

It costs up to \$50,000 to get the security people in to escort ships. Other attempts to defeat pirates have included recordings of dogs barking, and the "dreaded" slippery foam, which is probably as dangerous for the crew as for the outlaws, speculated Capt John.

On the evolving Somali pirate: this is the type of man who started his business from scratch and it has grown and adapted into an extremely profitable and efficient enterprise. So far, an estimated \$180m has been paid in ransoms, with indications that some of the money is now also being invested in 4x4 wheel cars and the Kenyan property market.

As a result of this now well-established and lucrative business model, there are an estimated 2,000 to 3,000 pirates today, and they have become more sophisticated in their approach, they are adapting to the changes the mariner's efforts to keep ships secure, and they are using more and more sophisticated and technologically advanced equipment.

Despite centuries of piracy in different forms, there are still complacent crews, and even today, it is estimated that 25% of vessels do not report their voyage to the patrolling navies and authorities watching out for them off the Somali coast. Vessels are still not doing enough to protect themselves said Captain John, and he suggested that putting extra crew on board to watch for threats would be a good start. One day there will be a shooting war, Capt John worries. Somebody is going to put a rocket propelled grenade through the side of a tanker.

He said that a long-term, on-shore solution is required, but that could take many years and until then Somali piracy will continue, and in all probability, spread much further afield and away from the reach of the navies, and it will spawn further copycat attempts elsewhere in the world.

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