

TROUBLED WATERS

Piracy in one of the world's key sea routes has reached epidemic levels

– but the International Maritime Organisation is hoping this year will

finally see the situation brought under control. Ed Stocker attends a

specially convened conference aimed at finding solutions

STEERING A VESSEL through the Gulf of Aden is no easy task. The waters, flanked on either side by the Yemeni and Somali coastlines, are teeming with bands of pirates ready to attack boats as they navigate around the Horn of Africa on their way either to or from the Suez Canal. With attempted hijackings occurring almost daily, crews are forced to protect their boats with barbed wire and water cannons from hostage-seeking assailants. In many cases, an armed escort ship is the only guarantee of safe passage.

Even as media reports dwindle, perhaps as a result of global ennui at the sheer scale of the problem, piracy incidents are on the rise. Such is the threat to international business and humanitarian charities that the International Maritime Organisation (IMO) convened a conference on 3 February, at its Albert Embankment headquarters in London, to launch a piracy action plan aimed at 'orchestrating the response'. In broad terms, the goal was to push the issue up the political agenda by making it the theme of this year's World Maritime Day, scheduled for 29 September, and to work toward a global consensus on tackling the impasse.

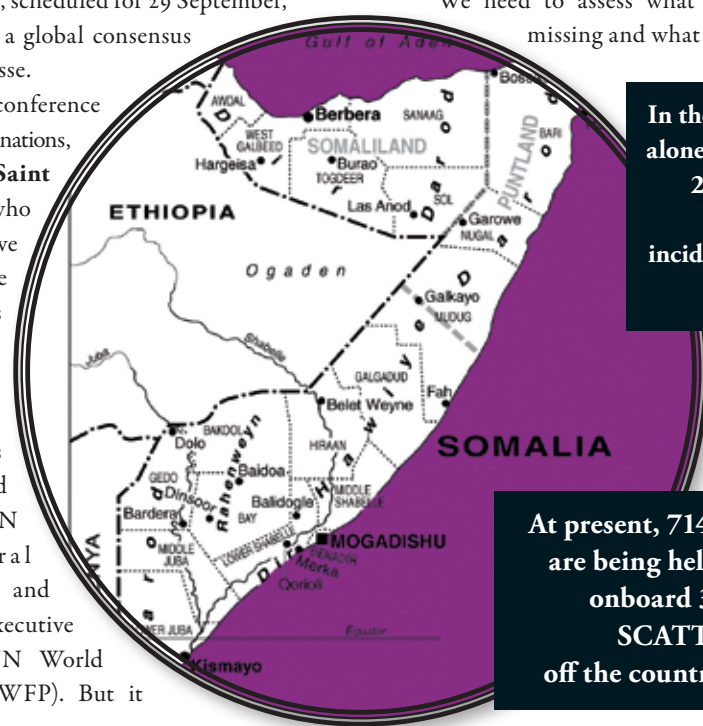
Attending the conference were many seafaring nations, from **Yemen** to **Saint Kitts** and **Nevis**, who turned the concave main hall of the IMO's headquarters into a mini United Nations. They'd come to listen to speeches by distinguished guests including UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and Josette Sheeran, Executive Director of the UN World Food Programme (WFP). But it

was IMO Secretary-General Efthimios Mitropoulos, opening the talks, who gave the starkest analysis of the current situation: 'In the past 12 months alone, there have been 286 piracy-related incidents off the coast of Somalia. They have resulted in 67 hijacked ships with 1,130 seafarers on board; whilst at present, 714 seafarers are being held for ransom onboard 30 ships scattered at various points off the country's extensive coastline.'

In a cruel twist of fate, the conference had been given extra urgency by the news that a crew member from the MV Beluga Nomination, a German cargo vessel hijacked in January off the coast of the Seychelles, had been shot dead the day before by his panicky captors as another vessel made a rescue attempt. This may have been a forum convened to tackle what Ban Ki-moon described as a 'global menace', but there was no doubt that East Africa was being singled out as the hotspot – and **Somalia** in particular.

When he took to the podium, Ban Ki-moon recognised that not enough progress is being made.

'We need to assess what is working, what is missing and what needs to be done and



PIRATES ARE BECOMING MORE SOPHISTICATED, HIJACKINGS ARE INCREASING AND THE LENGTH OF TIME CREWS ARE BEING HELD IS SPIRALLING.

improved,' he declared. 'Although piracy manifests itself at sea, the roots of the problem are to be found ashore.' But he was also keen to provide a glimmer of hope, noting that whereas the straits of Malacca and **Singapore** were in previous decades among the most dangerous sea routes in the world, combined efforts by the IMO and UN have since brought them under control. His implication was that the same is possible in the Gulf of Aden and neighbouring Indian Ocean.

Of course, if the problem is to be solved, then the Somali situation will need urgent attention. The conference had

already set out a six-point action plan detailing the need to increase political awareness, review IMO guidelines, increase support from navies, improve anti-piracy coordination, assist states and give better care to seafarers. But if Somalia could be helped to rebuild – from the inside – then this would be a huge step forward in providing a solution. Somalia is a failed state, suffering from what Ban Ki-moon called a 'very weak government'; it lacks the policing infrastructure, both onshore and off, to make anti-piracy measures effective, and its broken judiciary system means that the few alleged pirates who are caught rarely go to trial.

The conference was particularly important because it highlighted two key points that are often forgotten when discussing shipping, the first of these being the humanitarian dynamic. 'Shipping' may conjure up images of an endless conveyor belt of Chinese vessels transporting cheap commodities and the oil industry moving fuel to major ports around the world, but such a one-dimensional viewpoint fails to recognise the vital support that charities give developing countries through sea access.

'The World Food Programme knows the importance of open sea lanes,' said Josette Sheeran in her address. 'Every year, we move food throughout the world to deliver up to 40 million meals to people who would otherwise perish or face severe malnourishment due to a lack of access to food. And we ship that food every day on the high seas. There's no place more vulnerable to having that lifeline cut off today than Somalia.'

Moreover, WFP doesn't just use ports in Somalia, and docking further down the coast of East Africa – or indeed sailing through the Indian Ocean, as the Beluga Nomination murder showed – throws up equal challenges. As Ms Sheeran explained, shipping is the quickest, easiest and most cost-effective way of getting food to people in need; increased transport costs will result in fewer funds being allocated to food aid. Nor is it merely the eastern seaboard of Africa that receives WFP help – landlocked nations also benefit from these

sea routes. If the Gulf of Aden becomes unnavigable, ships will have to detour around the Cape of Good Hope, leading to longer journey times, higher costs and more carbon dioxide emissions.

The second key point the conference addressed was the welfare of crewmembers. It's easy to forget about the people actually onboard these vessels and the stress they go

through in delivering their cargos. Theirs is a profession that has become extremely high risk – at times they are literally entering a war zone. Speaking off their plight was David Cockroft, Secretary-General of the International

Transport Workers' Federation (ITF), who described many seafarers as being 'at breaking point' from having to pass through the Gulf of Aden on a regular basis. Pirates are becoming more sophisticated, hijackings are increasing and the length of time crews are being held is spiralling. And even after a safe release, the psychological trauma of being held prisoner doesn't simply vanish.

On a more positive note, the armed escort system is clearly working, and Ms Sheeran in particular was keen to use the conference as a platform to martial support for increased resources to extend its coverage. For her organisation, armed escorts have proven vital. The statistics speak for themselves: since 2007, every WFP ship in the Gulf of Aden has had a military escort from either the UN, EU or NATO, and not one of them has been hijacked.

But one can't help but feel that while armed escorts provide essential protection, the key to finding a lasting solution is dealing with the root of the problem. Somalia is currently a vast breeding ground for piracy, and vital work will need to be done to ensure that locals are no longer attracted by the lifestyle or forced into it due to a lack of viable alternatives. The UN has a vital role to play in making sure the justice system is strengthened and that poverty is reduced. Ban Ki-moon himself acknowledged the pressing nature of these underlying political and socio-economic issues. 'Despite the deployment of naval assets to the region, the number of hijackings has risen considerably,' he admitted. 'We need to move beyond impressive deterrent efforts and make sure they are carried out in consultation with other elements of the strategy.' www.imo.org



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