

**STRATEGIC SOLUTIONS FOR THE SOMALIA PIRACY PROBLEM**  
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The international community is losing the battle with its Somali anti-piracy operations even while it is spending huge amounts of money in monitoring and defending ships on the Indian Ocean. The news of four Americans killed by Somali pirates off the coast of Oman on 22<sup>nd</sup> February 2011 underscores the urgent need for finding a solution to the Somali piracy endemic. Somalia has been in crisis for the last 20 years due to internal conflicts, external interventions, and growing Islamic fundamentalism which is now coupled with piracy. A strategy for new thinking to rescue this failed State and its lost young men is desperately needed. This article indicates a solution.

*1. Losing the Somali Piracy battle*

According to the International Maritime Bureau, Somali pirates are now holding 33 vessels and 758 hostages<sup>1</sup>. The United Nations estimates the annual cost of piracy in the Indian Ocean to be between US\$5 to US\$7 billion. It is estimated that a total of US\$238 million was paid in ransoms during 2010 – a sum that may be exceeded in 2011. Other additional costs include insurance estimated between US\$460 million and US\$3.2 billion in terms of re-routing of ships to avoid risk of being attacked<sup>2</sup>.

There seems to be no end in sight of attacks and the numbers of ships and hostages held will undoubtedly increase if an alternative strategy to undermine piracy is not developed. Further, and as is well-known, the more that ransoms are paid the more piracy activities there are, for this is a flourishing and lucrative business for young unemployed men in Somalia. The United Nations reports piracy receipts in Puntland, Somalia are three times the region's income. These funds help sustain officials who provide assistance to the pirates and guarantee the continued flow of intelligence and support<sup>3</sup>.

So, what has been done about it? Major Powers have been debating a long-term solution to the hijackings in what have become the most dangerous waters in the world. The Somalia coast is one of the longest in Africa at around 4,000 kilometres while warships from more than a dozen countries have formed what U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki-moon described as "one of the largest anti-piracy flotillas in modern history<sup>4</sup>." They include NATO, EU and a 25-nation coalition under American command and headquartered in Bahrain. China, Japan, India, Iran, Russia and Saudi Arabia, among

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<sup>1</sup> Cited in The Economist 'No stopping them' 9<sup>th</sup> February 2011

<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Webb: 'The cost of Somali piracy' The Procurement Intelligence Unit (PIU), 24 January 2011

<sup>3</sup> Raymond Gilpin: 'Counting the Costs of Somali Piracy', [www.usip.org](http://www.usip.org) accessed 22<sup>nd</sup> June 2009

<sup>4</sup> Alisha Ryu: 'Somali Piracy Exposes Weakness in UN Law of the Sea' Global Security, Nairobi, 8 April 2009

others, deploy their own naval forces under national command.<sup>5</sup> Combined Task Force 150, a multinational coalition task force, took on the role of fighting Somali piracy by establishing a Maritime Security Patrol Area (MSPA) within the Gulf of Aden<sup>6</sup>. Yet, despite these efforts the Somali piracy battle is being lost.

## *2. Root causes of the Somali Piracy*

Much has been said and written about the increase of Somali Piracy activities in the Indian Ocean but while the world's attention is for the most part fixed on the ocean, the real challenges lie inside Somalia. There are three major reasons that contribute to the explosion of Somali Piracy on the Indian Ocean:

- I. Somalia's long civil wars have had an enormous adverse affect on the young people of Somalia. For the last 20 years, the Somali youth have had no effectively functioning government, received no education, no law enforcement, no employment opportunities and no peace and normality in their lives. The UN estimates two thirds of the Somali youth are unemployed. Because of the long years of conflict and instability, most of the youth in Central and South Somalia are illiterate and many of them have not even seen what a school looks like. They grew up in violence and near starvation which, unsurprisingly, has led them to guns as the only solution to their poverty. In recent years they mastered a new survival strategy - the art of piracy which appears to offer them the financial security they need.
- II. Lack of effective government, lawlessness, abundance of arms, external interventions and invasions have helped facilitate crime and led them onto the high seas. This potpourri has been turned into a useful resource with the availability of ruthless criminals, likely to be based in safe havens, who know how to exploit the young and unemployed for profit.
- III. Piracy off the coast of Somalia was also caused in part by illegal fishing and the dumping of toxic waste in Somali waters by foreign vessels that have severely constrained the ability of locals to earn a living. In the face of this, impoverished Somalis living by the sea have been allegedly forced to defend their own fishing expeditions out of ports such as Eyl, Kismayo and Harardhere — all now considered to be pirate dens. Some have been quoted as saying that they have watched their loved ones become sick and die after European toxic waste was dropped on their shores and decided to do something about it – their own simple protection needs quickly turned to piracy

## *3. A solution*

There is a solution that does not involve more expensive enforcement but requires “thinking outside the box”. After years of futile international efforts to curtail the criminal piracy operations, it is time to think imaginatively and a counter piracy campaign developed. Such a solution should not simply increase the number of navy ships and guns facing the pirates since killing and force will only

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<sup>5</sup> The Economist: 'No stopping them', Feb 9<sup>th</sup> 2011

<sup>6</sup> Commander, Combined Maritime Forces, "Combined Task Force 150 Thwarts Criminal Activities", Public Affairs 29 Sept 2008

encourage revenge as history has demonstrated. Clearly, without supporting and strengthening the current weak Transitional Federal Government (TFG) to control its coastlines, piracy will flourish and extremism and fundamentalism operations will continue to explode. As the United States Defence Secretary, Robert Gates stated in 2009, there is “no purely military solution” to the Piracy issue and the problem would only worsen without a stable government in Somalia. Deploying armed guards on ships or training crews to shoot the pirates would only provoke a more brutal response and violence will lead to more violence”<sup>7</sup>.

But there is an alternative that depends on deeper knowledge of how Somali society operates. Believe it or not, most Somalis would love to get rid of the scourge of piracy and the steady escalation of violence and uncertainty in their lives. Somali society, too, is highly influenced by the clan elders. Witness the stability in Somaliland where the elders hold major sway and influence and have brought that country the much admired democracy, functioning institutions, law and order and above all peace that Somalia itself can only dream of.

The most powerful counter piracy weapon will be peace, employment opportunities and stability inside Somalia. A solution, therefore, is to involve the elders and clan leaders who live in the three main ports in Somalia where piracy operations originate and where specific clans dominate. These are: Eyl in the North in Puntland, and Hobyo and Harardhere in the Central area of Somalia.<sup>8</sup> For this solution to work, a bargain must be made with the elders in these villages so that if piracy reduces in their sphere of influence, then they will be rewarded with development funds to support youth education, youth employment and health care. Funds can increase as piracy reduces, or be reduced as piracy (easily measured by international sources) increases.

Will this work? Yes, since historically the culture of Somali society has revered its elders. Even today, children are taught to remember and then to recite all their forbearers going back several hundred years. Few disobey the will of the elders. Curiously, elders are often brought together in meetings known locally as *gogal* or *shir nabadded* to iron out and rule upon disputes, but have been just about ignored by the international community.

In combination, and in consultation, with the dialogue with the elders a number of other international initiatives could be discussed. These could consist of:

- Support to Government training programs for security personal, coast guards and help strength the police forces
- Support pirate rehabilitation and reintegration programs

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<sup>7</sup> Jeff Bliss and Ed Johnson: ‘Obama Pledges International Crackdown on Rising Somali Piracy’, Bloomberg, April 14, 2009

<sup>8</sup> Roger Middleton: “Piracy in Somalia: Threatening Global Trade, Feeding Local Wars,” Chatham House Briefing Paper, 4-5, October 2008

- Support and promote political processes that undermine conflict and lead to greater stability
- Encourage major players in the international community to cooperate with the Somali Government to create an exclusive economic zone off the Somali coast, in which fishermen could fish for their own livelihood
- Rehabilitate pirate bases in coastal areas in conjunction with the elders and clan leaders, until an alternative economic and security structure could be put in place. This will also create employment opportunities for the unemployed
- Create an institution whereby former pirates are included in a coast guard organization to safeguard the Somali coast.
- Introduce measures that hold regional authorities, especially those in Puntland and Central Area of Somalia, accountable for supporting and facilitating piracy operations.

#### *4. Concluding remarks*

There is a solution to Somali piracy but the solution, as is known from so many stories about successful development efforts, must come from the local people themselves. No out-sourced solution will ever work in Somalia. The next step is to form a group of Somalis from the regions specified and encourage them to start the dialogue with the clan elders. Such an approach will eventually work since there is no way that gunpowder diplomacy can ever succeed among such a proud, and some may say stubborn, people as the Somalis.