

Somali Pirates: Criminals or Victim?

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Somali pirates in small boats are seen alongside the hijacked *Faina*. (AP Photo/U.S. Navy/Ho)

On Sunday, April 12, the U.S. Navy snipers shot dead three young Somali pirates holding American Captain Richard Phillips. President Obama vowed an international crackdown to halt piracy off the coast of Somalia soon after. On April 10, French commandos had killed two Somali pirates when they stormed a hijacked yacht and on 12 November 2008 British commandos had killed two suspected pirates who tried to seize a Danish ship in the Gulf of Aden. Finally, Secretary Clinton came up with a four point plan proposing force with, perhaps, a glimmer of understanding when she advocated the need for a 'Summit on Development' for Somalia. But is the search and killing of illiterate young Somali men the only way to stop the hijacking of ships in the Indian Ocean and Gulf of Aden?

New Thinking required

The sight of massive navy presence, presumably costing millions of dollars an hour to run, facing tiny boats suggests that, perhaps, there is a need for new thinking? It is very hard for readers of this note to imagine young kids with absolutely zero education. We have all had experience talking to, perhaps our older generations, and finding it difficult to communicate. But our older generations probably had at least some secondary education and probably none were illiterate.

So, we keep killing these kids each time they seize a ship. How is that going to solve the piracy operations? Paying off the pirates with large sums of money is, clearly, disastrous. Violence is not a sensible solution and if anything it will radicalize more young Somali men who have nothing to lose. Engagement and development is the key to the solution of the piracy endemic in Somalia.

Much has been said and written about the increase of piracy activities in the high seas near Somalia and while the world's attention is mainly fixed on the seas, the real challenges lie inside Somalia. What is now new is that the international community is talking about Somalia because their ships and sailors are hijacked and this is why warships from several countries including the United States, NATO, EU and many countries have been sent to patrol the Indian Ocean and the Gulf of Aden.

Even the UN, perhaps the last bastion of peace and development, has entered the fray when the UN Security Council unanimously adopted a resolution on 2 June 2008 calling on all countries with a stake in maritime safety off Somalia to send naval ships and military aircraft to confront growing piracy in the Gulf of Aden.¹

But, the situation is simply more complex than more Navy engagement. While we all condemn the increasing Somali piracy operations, the corporate media and the international community have, in general, totally failed to address the root causes of the piracy. What we are seeing is just the visible tip of a complex web of challenges inside Somalia, a web that reaches across the country, the region and the world².

Don't forget Somalia's background

Since the Somali State collapsed in 1991, the people of Somalia have had no peace, no security and no stability in their homeland. Instead they have witnessed their country torn

¹ Recognising Somalia's inability to provide maritime security within its own waters, pursuant to the UN Security Council Resolution 1816, authorised States to intervene in the Somalia territorial waters while resorting to all the necessary means, in accordance with the Law of the Sea. Resolution 1816 was effectively renewed on 2 December 2008 with the adoption of Resolution 1846 which extended the international community's mandate for a further 12 months.

²Piracy Roger Middleton symptom of bigger problem, BBC 15 April 2009 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/8001183.stm>

and destroyed by conflicts that were perpetuated by competing warlords, religious fanatics and clan warfare. Although the blame lies mainly with the Somalis sadly the meager international efforts have totally failed to date.



A 1992



B 2000



C 2009

Three generations of Somali development. From (A) starvation to (B) shooting lessons to (C) pirates.

This long conflict has had an enormous adverse affect on the young people of Somalia. For more than 18 years, most of the Somali youth have had no functioning government, no institutions, no law enforcement and no employment opportunities. Most of them have not seen what a school looks like and since there is abundance of weapons, all they now know is how to fire a gun. They are the lost generation of Somalia.

They grew up in violence, conflict and starvation which led them to the gun culture as shown above. In recent years they mastered a new survival strategy and the art of piracy which are symptoms and root causes of the decades of instability, chaos and lawlessness in their homeland. Years of drought and hunger afflicting many parts of the country and neglect by the international community is also another contributing factor to their misery. It is therefore of no surprise that the young Somali boys resorted to criminal activities from setting up roadblocks to supporting warlords to hijacking ships.

No doubt the many criminals in the world are flocking to engage Somali youth in their new pursuits. Some already suspect that charitable donations in Qatar and Dubai are being misused while no doubt that the Mafiosi from around the world are not far behind.

New maritime hazards a major, and ignored threat

In addition to the long years of conflict and lawlessness, Somalia has also become the toxic, and possibly nuclear, waste dump of many countries. According to the UN envoy for Somalia, Mr. Ahmedou Ould-Abdallah, the UN has "reliable information" that European and Asian companies are dumping toxic waste, including nuclear waste, off the Somali coastline.³ The spokesman for the United Nations Environmental Program, Mr. Nuttall stated that on average, it cost European companies \$US2.50 per ton to dump waste on Somalia's beaches and coastal waters compared to around \$US250 a ton to dispose of the wastes in Europe. In an interview with the BBC, Mr. Nuttall reportedly said "It appears that the tsunami broke open the containers and scattered a lot of these toxic substances around. We are talking about radioactive chemicals, heavy metals, medical waste - you name it,"⁴.

Since there is no functioning government to stop this illegal toxic dumping off the coastal areas of Somalia, people continue to die of mysterious illnesses and cancer⁵. 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

Foreign countries fishing ships also exploit the vulnerabilities of this failed state. Somalia's 3,330 km (2,000 miles) of coastline - the longest in continental Africa - has been pillaged by foreign vessels. According to a U.N. report, an estimated \$300 million worth of seafood is stolen from the country's coastline each year by foreign fishing boats. In the face of this, impoverished Somalis living by the sea have been forced over the years to defend their own fishing expeditions out of ports such as Eyl, Kismayo and Harardhere — all now considered to be pirate dens⁶. "I was forced to hijack foreign ships after the central government collapsed" stated one Somali fisherman who is now a pirate leader. "No one was monitoring the sea, and we couldn't fish properly, because the ships which trawl the Somali coasts illegally would destroy our small boats and equipment. That is what forced us to become pirates"⁷.

So, new thinking required

The act of piracy is criminal. But the world, and our rich world navies, must understand that there can never be a solution to the piracy operations at sea without a resolution of the statelessness and lack of an effective government in war-torn Somalia. What is driving these young men some of them as young as 15 years, who dare to take on huge ships with their tiny fishing boats and bare feet are their desperate need for food, money and survival. Without a

³ Najad Abdullahi, 'Toxic waste' behind Somali piracy , 11 October, 2008

<http://english.aljazeera.net/news/africa/2008/10/2008109174223218644.html>

⁴ BBC 2 March, 2005, 17:20 GMT <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/4312553.stm>

⁵ Cathy Majtenyi VOA, UN: Nuclear Waste Being Released on Somalia's Shores After Tsunami Nairobi 23 February 2005

⁶ TIME: Ishaan Tharoor, How Somalia's Fishermen Became Pirates, Apr. 18, 2009

⁷ East African Forum , Reissued by Reuters, Interview -" with a Somali pirate" - Yassin's story - Sat Apr 11, 2009

constructive approach and policies designed to restore security, stability and development inside Somalia, piracy will escalate and killing the young pirates will only intensify their illegal piracy activities.

Wouldn't it have sent a powerful message to Somali youth if, instead of sniper fire the bargain to release Captain Phillips had been the offer of education scholarships? Ridiculous I hear you say. But at least a deal with a short stay in prison followed by assistance to gain an education. Readers would be surprised at how many Somalis have come to the rich world and are now leaders, many of them with PhDs, and are serving rich countries as doctors, university professors and lawyers. These young pirates could be helped to achieve that on day!

Reward instead of punishment? But have not these people been punished enough in their young lives? More punishment will lead to increased radicalism and more sophisticated ways of hijacking shipping lanes. Stop shooting them and give them, hope. This may not totally eliminate piracy but may reduce fundamentalism. It is time to think out of the box with these never ending conflicts.