

Insurance

Fresh pirate attacks expose security gap for Indian Ocean shipping

Experts say armed Somali groups wait for ships on edge of area designated

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Operation ATALANTA forces liberated the Maltese-flagged Hellas Aphrodite. The crew, composed of 24 people, is safe and no injuries have been reported. Throughout the incident, they remained in the citadel in direct contact with ATALANTA. (Photo: EU Naval Force Operation ATALANTA)



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The attack on a Greek-managed product tanker highlighted how Somali pirates have identified and targeted a security weakness in international shipping.

Security experts say Somali-linked piracy has spread further out to sea since late 2023, with groups operating hundreds of kilometres off the coast.



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Latsco tanker crew 'safe' after pirate attack with warship on the way

The seizure of an Iranian-flagged dhow for use as a mothership allowed pirate groups to extend the range of their operations and support smaller skiffs carrying highly mobile armed teams.

The attack on the Latsco Marine-managed 50,000-dwt Hellas Aphrodite (built 2016) was about 550 nautical miles (1,000 km) off the coast of Somalia and carried out by men armed with guns and grenade launchers.

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The position of the mothership allowed pirates to target vessels transiting outside of the area designated as a high-risk war zone by insurance underwriters.

The same group is believed to have been responsible for an attempted boarding on Friday of the Marshall Islands-flagged LNG carrier, the 216,200-cbm Al Thumama (built 2008). It was the fourth attempted attack in six days, believed to be linked to the mothership, identified as the IssaMohamadi.

A Spanish frigate on Tuesday took control of the dhow after the pirates abandoned it. They remained at large.

Oceangoing ships avoid extra insurance payments by staying outside of the Joint War Listed Area (JWLA) that stretches about 400 to 500 nautical miles from the Somali coast.

Shipowners must inform insurers if they plan to transit through the JWLA and pay additional premiums for single transits due to the heightened piracy risks.

This has meant that ships travel on known routes and without having to follow conditions set by some war underwriters in what are considered more dangerous specified areas.

“The pirates are just waiting for ships to transit,” one expert said. “They know where they will see vessels avoiding paying those extra premiums and may not be carrying armed guards on board.”

The Hellas Aphrodite is understood to have kidnap and ransom insurance, but underwriters do not always insist on having armed security teams on board, according to insurance market sources. Latsco Marine declined to comment on the policy.

One market player described the decision not to have a security team on board as “surprising”, given that the ship was loaded with oil and lying low in the water, making it easier to board.

But the attack on the Hellas Aphrodite was only just inside the area where some security companies advise having armed guards.

The attack follows a pattern of attempted boardings far from land over the last two years.

The 41,600-dwt Ruen (built 2016) was captured by Somali pirates in December 2023, some 450 miles (830 km) east of the Yemeni island of Socotra.

In March last year, pirates seized the 58,000-dwt Abdullah (built 2015), some 600 nautical miles east of Mogadishu. The pirates released the ship the following month after \$5m ransom was reportedly paid.

Early this year, US maritime authorities reported suspicious approaches out to 960 nautical miles off Somalia, industry sources said.

Industry sources said the uptick in piracy attacks has not been matched by the tightening of best practices by crews.



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Warship hunts pirate mothership after tanker attack

War risk insurer Vessel Protect said the question of where shipowners were liable for additional premiums was not an “abstract boundary debate” and questioned if the current system responded quickly enough to changing threats.

The boundaries of war-risk areas are decided at meetings of underwriters and security advisers in London.

“If the JWLA doesn’t reflect where pirates are, then crew support, compensation and crisis response can fall into a grey zone,” the insurer said.

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