



Piracy on High Seas is Big Business

by John J. Brandon

In recent years, old fashioned high seas piracy has made a rather dramatic return, most notably in Southeast Asia. The problem has significant commercial consequences and calls for a more concerted response from all affected parties.

According to a recent report by the International Maritime Bureau, pirate attacks rose by 56 percent worldwide last year. More than two-thirds of such attacks occur in Asian waters, with most taking place in Indonesia's sea-lanes.

With 90 percent of world trade moving by ship, and 33 percent of all shipping moving through Southeast Asia's waters, this disturbing rise in piracy poses significant challenges for both Southeast Asia and world commerce. Over 600 vessels a day, many of them oil tankers and cargo ships, pass through the Malacca Straits and the South China Sea. This area has become a favorite hunting ground for modern-day pirates.

Since shipping is a highly competitive market, ship owners and captains are reluctant to report attacks because they fear rising insurance rates and do not want to be perceived as unreliable freight carriers. Nor do they want to risk losing time in port for an inquiry. As a result, many pirate attacks go unrecorded. Although estimates are difficult to calculate, it is believed financial losses from maritime crime will be as high as \$16 billion this year.

The spread of poverty and increased unemployment have helped make piracy an attractive source of income. Pirates in Southeast Asia range from opportunistic fisherman, common criminals, and ex-members of the armed forces to sophisticated crime syndicates. Corruption among poorly-paid maritime officials is also a factor as pirates appear to be well-informed about ship movements and cargoes.

Maritime security forces are proving to be no match for pirates who use radar to locate vessels, gather intelligence from radio transmissions, and attack using motorized boats and automatic weapons.

Pirates are becoming increasingly violent, yet few ever wind up behind bars. The International Maritime Bureau says nearly all the dozens of people murdered at sea in the last couple of years were killed in Southeast Asia. But many countries in the region are unwilling to prosecute offenders for acts of piracy committed in international waters, and prefer to deport them instead.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) would be best served by putting this topic on its formal policy agenda. Piracy is a significant problem that needs a regional solution at

the highest level. One way to accomplish this would be for all ten members of the group to sign the International Maritime Organization's 1988 Convention on the Suppression of Unlawful Acts against the Safety of Maritime Navigation.

Ratification of the convention gives signatory governments the power to prosecute people caught in their own territorial waters for acts of piracy committed under another country's jurisdiction.

Washington can help by allowing the U.S. Coast Guard to train various ASEAN maritime security forces in combating piracy. Such assistance would send a signal to Southeast Asia that the United States is committed to the region's security and economic well-being.

John Brandon is an Assistant Director of The Asia Foundation in Washington. This article originally ran in the International Herald Tribune and is reprinted with permission.