

Date: 28th October 2016

"Making the maritime environment a safer place to live and work"



Reporting and analysis on recent incidents of piracy and terrorism in the HRA



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LNGC Galicia Spirit Incident 25th October 2016

The attack occurred 5nm south of the Traffic Separation Scheme (TSS). Teekay have released the following public statement:

"We write to advise that our vessel LNGC Galicia Spirit was involved in a security-related incident on 25th October 2016 at 09:59 UTC, when transiting off the coast of Yemen, near Bab el Mandeb Straits. During the transit the vessel encountered a group of four small craft, one of which detached from the group and altered course in pursuit of Galicia Spirit.

Although the assailants did engage the vessel with small arms fire, the evidence suggests that no RPG was used during the attack. We have not been able to verify the identity of the assailants.

We can confirm that the vessel is now safe and secure and has exited the High Risk Area. There are no injuries to personnel on board the vessel as a result of the attack; no pollution nor loss of containment; and, following the attack, there have been no further incidents on board the vessel. The necessary parties and security services have been advised."

The attack has the hallmarks of a traditional pirate attack, but at present an attempt at terrorism cannot be ruled out as there has been no verification on the identity of the assailants.

MAST is monitoring the situation and will continue to update as further details become available.



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Chronological list of incidents and events in October

The attack on LNGC Galicia Spirit is not an isolated incident. It should be viewed within the wider context of events which suggest:

- there is increasing Somali pirate capability and intent;
- increased hostile Houthi maritime activity, and;
- an increasingly fragile security framework within the region on land and at sea.

1st October 2016: HSV-2 Swift, a UAE supply vessel was destroyed by a Houthi missile attack. It is known that skiffs and small boats were used as spotters as well as to follow up the attack with small arms fire. To read MAST's report [click here](#).

7th October 2016: UN Security Council released report on piracy in Somalia.

The report notes the progress made to suppress and ultimately eradicate Somali piracy, but stresses that;

“Although significant, such progress remains fragile and reversible. Credible reports indicate that Somali pirates possess the intent and capability to resume attacks against large commercial ships, should the opportunity present itself, and to endanger smaller vessels, which remain particularly vulnerable. There have been reports of pirate groups being organized and equipped in Mudug and in the area in the Horn of Africa east of Boosaasoin Puntland. The uncertain political situation in the central region of Somalia, coupled with the finite mandate of the international naval force stationed off the coast, has the potential to become a security vacuum that could trigger a resurgence of piracy.”

To read the full UN report [click here](#).

8th October 2016: USS MASON is targeted and fired at by two Houthi missiles. To read MAST's incident report [click here](#).

12th October 2016: The Houthi's target USS MASON and USS PONCE.

22nd October 2016: An 'approach'/engagement between pirates and an MV occurred on the 22 October 300nm off Mudug, Puntland. To read MAST's incident report [click here](#).

24th October 2016: A reported \$1.5 million ransom was paid in order to secure the release of the 26 sailors from the FY Naham 3, a Taiwan owned fishing vessel, who have been held hostage in Somalia since 2012.

25th October 2016: LNG carrier Galicia Spirit attacked in Bab el Mandeb. To read MAST's initial report [click here](#).

26th October 2016: Reports indicate that ISIS has captured its first (coastal) town in Somalia, Puntland. To read further [click here](#).



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26th October 2016: Ethiopia withdraws its troops in Somalia over ‘lack of support’, where they have been battling Islamist militants. To read further [click here](#).

27th October 2016: A major pirate attack on the LNG carrier, Melati Satu, has been reported. The attack reportedly occurred in the Ban el Mandeb Strait, and a Saudi naval vessel was dispatched to the scene of the incident. The report remains unverified and UKMTO has stated that the attack did not take place.

Analysis

Piracy

It is known that Somali pirates use relevant media and other reports, such as the recent UN report, to gauge the potential for conducting successful pirate operations. The UN report echoes the EUNAVFOR, CMF and NATO threat assessment report (10th March 2016) which detailed the increasing vulnerability of vessels within the HRA and the general reduction of armed guards, BMP 4 measures and naval presence (NATO’s naval operation Ocean Shield terminates at the end of 2016).

“Current threat assessments indicate that a resurgence of piracy is more likely if the international naval presence dissipates and other deterrents, such as private security on ships and best management practices, are relaxed.”

The recent ‘approach’/engagement reported by an MV on the 22nd October, 300nm off Mudug indicates that it is likely there is a Pirate Attack Group (PAG) operating in the Somali Basin. Military forces have commented that the coast between Harardhere and Garacad remains permissive to pirate operations, and it is possible that pirate investors will continue to launch PAG’s from that stretch of coast. The Somali Basin is an attractive area for pirates to operate, given the lack of patrolling warships and plenty of potential targets from fishing fleets to commercial vessels. With a decrease in armed guards on board MV’s in this part of the HRA, the likelihood of a vessel being hijacked is steadily increasing.

With PAG’s operating in the Somali Basin this does not mean the Gulf of Aden is off the hook. The Horn of Africa is an ideal place to operate from and the UN Security Council, NATO, CMF and EUNAVFOR are concerned the area east of Boosaasoin round the horn to Bargaal remain permissive to piracy. There are plenty of local small fishing vessels to provide cover, a sparse naval presence and shipping lanes close by. From now until the SW monsoon in June, the sea state in the HRA will remain suitable for piracy operations.

Terrorism

The attack on Galicia Spirit occurred within close proximity to where Houthi’s have been operating small vessels to spot and attack vessels connected to the Yemen civil war. The Saudi’s have made it clear that there is no obvious end to the civil war in Yemen, and this in itself is an incentive for the Houthi’s to take the fight to the Saudi-led coalition in all environments.



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We know that the Houthi's have the capability to conduct missile attacks on vessels offshore. So far these attacks have been confined to military/military supply vessels. While deliberate missile targeting of a commercial vessel cannot be ruled out, it is unlikely given that the Houthi's will want to conserve their few missiles for military targeting. Attacks on commercial vessels are more likely to come from small vessels using small arms, RPG's and IED's. Not dissimilar to the attacks on Galicia Spirit and Melati Satu, although until these have been fully investigated it is difficult to be sure who the perpetrators were.

Somalia

Reports of ISIS capturing a coastal town on the Gulf of Aden are worrying, as is the withdrawal of Ethiopian troops from AMISOM. The alignment between ISIS and Al Shabaab, if any, is not clear. However should ISIS gain a tight hold, we may see a further deterioration of the federal election process. Similarly, the withdrawal of Ethiopian AMISOM troops is likely to create a security vacuum in the south of Somalia that Al Shabaab will be keen to fill.

Summary

The events of October 2016 suggest that the HRA is becoming a more dangerous place than hitherto as the security framework, which has served commercial shipping so well up to now, is at the risk of being undermined by the breakdown of regional security in some of the States bordering the Gulf of Aden and Indian Ocean.

While this situation is reversible, until we start to see evidence of an improvement to the political situation in Yemen and Somalia, ship operators are strongly encouraged to keep their security measures under review.

In the current security climate, armed security in the HRA is strongly recommended, though we would caution that armed security teams should be vetted for training standards as well as ensuring that they can demonstrate genuine ownership of the weapons. Being unable to confirm ownership of weapons could result in the Master and armed security team being arrested by national authorities.



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