

SEYCHELLOIS ARTISANAL FISHERMEN VICTIMS OF SOMALI PIRACY

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Introduction

For hundreds of years the Seychelles Islands have been known as a haven for pirates, who hid their stolen bounty (treasures) in the form of Gold and Silver. During that time ships were attacked, battles fought, sailors and passengers killed, goods stolen and buried in the more remote of the 115 islands that form part of the Seychelles archipelago in the Indian Ocean.

Today the pirates plying the Indian Ocean and the Gulf of Aden have changed their tactics and strategy. They are now targeting tankers, merchant ships, cruise ships, chartered yachts, industrial vessels and lately artisanal fishing vessels. They take the crew as hostage in exchange for ransom in the form of hard currency.

There are a lot of factors that contributed to these merciless and criminal activities. One of the main reasons is that Somalia has been without a democratically elected government since 1991 and the rule of law therefore has ceased to exist. The country is divided and is largely being controlled by warlords while certain parts are being governed by pirates and a terrorist group Al-Shabab.

The world blames pirates for attacking vessels that cross through the Somali Canal, the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean while the pirates claim that they have been left with little choice but to put aside their fishing boats, nets, hooks and lines to replace them with modern, high-tech vessels and sophisticated weaponry and communication systems.

Illegal fishing by foreign long-line vessels trespassing in Somali territorial waters and the dumping of toxic waste in their waters has depleted fish stocks and few alternate ways to make a living exist. The absence of a democratic and credible government for many years has created a culture of lawlessness and opened up space for piracy and other illegal activities.

The majority of the pirates are Somali youths, young men between the ages of 15 and 35 years old. Most of the pirates work for rich tycoons, businessman from the Arab world, Asia and some Western countries as well as Africa. They are the ones who provide the pirates with the resources to carry out these brutal crimes. They

are the ones who exploit young people to do their dirty work in order to satisfy their own selfish greed.

Records of piracy in the Seychelles

Since the year 2009, a number of Seychellois vessels (chartered yachts, industrial and artisanal fishing vessels) have been targeted by Somali pirates and a number of Seychellois crew kidnapped and held hostage in Somalia. This situation has caused our tourism and fishing industry, the two pillars of our economy, to suffer a great deal. Below is a list of vessels captured by Somali pirates in our territorial waters.

28 February 2009

'Serenity', a charter yacht with two Seychellois crew members on board, who were on their way to deliver the vessel to its owners in Madagascar, was kidnapped by Somali pirates inside the Seychelles EEZ (Exclusive Economic Zone). They were held in captivity in a port in Somalia and released seven months later on the 14th September 2009 after the Seychelles Authority negotiated for their release.

27th March 2009

'Indian Ocean Explorer', a Seychellois charter yacht, was kidnapped by Somali pirates at Alphonse some 65 miles from the main island Mahe. On board were seven Seychellois crew members. They were taken hostage and remained in captivity in Somalia for 88 days. Through negotiations between the owner of the vessel, the government and the pirates they were released after an undisclosed ransom was paid and returned to Seychelles on the 24th June 2009.

2nd October 2009

A European Union Spanish tuna purse seiner licensed to fish in and outside the Seychelles EEZ was captured by Somali pirates while fishing in Seychelles waters. The industrial fishing vessel had a mixed crew from Spain, Madagascar, Seychelles, Senegal and the Ivory Coast. The vessel and the crew were released a month later after the Spanish government paid a large ransom.

29th March 2010

'Galate', a Seychellois fishing boat, was captured by Somali pirates in Seychelles territorial water. On board there were six Seychellois fishermen. They were freed

by the Seychelles Coast Guard who fought and captured the pirates. They returned to Mahe on the 1st April 2010. The pirates were arrested and detained. Later, in 2011, they were sentenced for 10 to 20 years in prison.

20th April 2010

Four Seychellois fishermen were captured by Somali pirates while on a fishing trip in Seychelles water. They were rescued by the Seychelles Coast Guard a day later and the pirates were arrested.

16th November 2010

'Faith', a Seychellois fishing boat, was captured with seven fishermen on board who were rescued by the Seychelles Coast Guard on the 20th November 2010.

30th Oct 2011

'Aride', a Seychellois artisanal fishing boat of 10 to 18 meters, was captured by Somali pirates some 60 nautical miles west of Mahe, close to a well known fishing spot locally known as "Seagull Bank". On board were two fishermen in their sixties. The fishing boat is currently anchored in a port in Somalia and the Seychelles authority has undertaken negotiations with the pirates for the safe release of the fishermen. So far the men have been able to communicate with their relatives telephonically.

This latest incidents provide clear evidence that the pirates are striking closer to the main island within the Seychelles group. They are also targeting our artisanal fishermen who provide the main source of protein for the Seychellois population and also supply the hotels.

The impacts of Piracy

The impact of piracy in Seychelles is mainly on our fishery and the tourism industry. With the latest development of Somali pirates kidnapping our local artisanal fishermen and their fishing boats within 60 miles of the main island of Seychelles our citizens are greatly concerned.

Today our local, artisanal fishermen are reluctant and afraid to venture too far out to sea, fearing the possibility of attack by Somali pirates. Piracy has also affected fishing in other ways:

- Our fishermen are targeting fish in specific areas designated by the Seychelles Coast Guard in collaboration with the Seychelles Fishing Authority. Concentrating a number of fishing vessels in a limited area will no doubt have a negative impact on our fish stocks, especially in the case where juvenile fish are being caught.
- Fishermen are no longer able to meet the demands of local communities and the tourists who visit our shores. The price of fish on the local market has increased tremendously bringing real hardship to the communities. Fish for export to Europe and Asia is also in undersupply with the result that fish workers in the processing plants are being put on standby and being laid off work.
- There is a reduction in the number of EU tuna purse seiners and EU long-line fishing vessels that are licensed to fish tuna in and outside the Seychelles EEZ since 2009 when the piracy activity increased significantly.
- Insurance costs have soared, increasing by at least 50%, which has also driven down port and fishery revenue in our country.
- Piracy has had a big impact on our tourism industry as a number of charter yachts have cancelled their inter-island trips due to the presence of Somali pirates in our water.

Government's response to the crisis

Since 2009, the Seychelles government has assisted and responded actively to the crisis putting in place a number of measures. A high-level committee, who negotiates directly with the pirates regarding the release of Seychellois fishermen and vessels held hostage in Somalia, has also been established.

Pirates captured or arrested for attacking vessels within our waters by Seychelles coast guard or other foreign forces patrolling the Indian Ocean waters are brought to justice. Through the financial assistance of the United Nation, the European Union, a prison is being built especially to detain Somali pirates found guilty, where they will serve out their sentences. So far there are more than 60 pirates in prison.

Meetings and conferences have been held with the assistance of the United Nations and the participation of various national, regional and international bodies regarding the piracy issue whereby pressure was put on improving maritime surveillance; ensuring an enduring and proper framework for legal

prosecutions; enforcing the law of the sea; and for international donors to honor their commitments.

The government has also assisted the fishing communities, especially boat owners with the installation of Vessel Monitoring Systems (VMS) on their fishing boats, made satellite phones available and provided fishers with charts that indicate specific locations and areas that are safe for fishing. Visits and meetings have also been made to Seychellois families who were victims of Somali pirates as well as counseling given to those held as hostages.

The role played by Apostleship of the Sea (AOS)

The Seychelles AOS has played a positive role in regard to Seychellois seafarers held hostage in Somalia. We have remained in constant contact with the families of the hostages and with two regional organizations that have direct liaisons with the authorities in Mogadishu, Somali, whereby we shared information and communication regarding the welfare of the hostages.

The AOS have also communicated and shared information to the AOS in other African regions regarding the criminal activities of the pirates. The AOS has published articles in the local Seafarers Newsletter, "Golet", as well in other publications to educate and develop the awareness of communities on the issue of piracy.

Mass celebrations, group prayers, services, visits to the hostages families, counseling and organizing fund-raising activities to help the hostages families that are in need are some of the activities realized by the AOS with the participation of other NGOs, government and the general public.

The AOS representative participated in a number of meetings organized by the Seychelles Fishing Authority and the hostage families, meeting with boat owners and fishermen and the Seychelles Coast Guard, Seychelles Fishing Authority regarding piracy activities affecting the operation of the domestic fishery while also attending regional seminars to give inputs on the impact that piracy has on the artisanal fishermen of Seychelles.

Conclusion

The issue of piracy is an international problem as it does not targeted only the artisanal fishing industry in the Seychelles or Africa but also non-African vessels that enter and cross the Somali canal, the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean waters.

The victims of piracy are mainly the poor seafarers who are working to earn their daily bread on cargo ships, tankers and industrial or semi-industrial vessels. They often work under very poor conditions to feed, clothe and educate their children and loved ones at home. They are the ones who are being held hostages in a foreign land under inhumane conditions, being denied their right to communicate with their families. They are the ones often abandoned by the ship owners, shipping companies and even the government, who sometimes refuses to intervene on their behalf for their liberation.

The struggle to eliminate the scourge of piracy must be seen as a collective effort undertaken by all nations that depend on the sea for their survival. That is why we in the AOS and all Friends of the AOS must meet to discuss the issues of piracy, to find ways and means to pressurize world leaders to stop talking and take action to assist seafarers suffering from the very real and ongoing threat of piracy.