

Maritime piracy has become a growth industry, netting hundreds of millions of euro for pirates over the last few years. But the response of Europol and its partners has started to pay off.

That pay-off is the result of, the coordinated, multi-pronged response of Europol, INTERPOL and the EU Naval Force (EU NAVFOR). Europol has contributed, among other things, by identifying key perpetrators, logistical assets and financial flows.

The scale of this coordinated response has been necessary because of the damage that piracy has wrought off the Horn of Africa. That damage has been significant and widespread, as these examples show:

- › Acts of maritime piracy off the coast of Somalia have threatened the supply of food to millions of people who depend on international aid provided through the World Food Programme.
- › Troops from the African Union battling the Al Shabaab insurgency in Mogadishu, Somalia, also depend on these supply routes.
- › Fifteen percent of the world's oil production, and 20 % of the world's trade, pass through the Gulf of Aden.
- › The rise in maritime piracy has sent shipping costs soaring, as insurance rates and security and operating costs have sky-rocketed.

COORDINATION IS KEY

Putting an end to maritime piracy requires a huge investment of logistical, military, law enforcement and judicial resources.

For its part, Europol is playing a key coordinating role. Its European Counter Terrorism Centre (ECTC) has been running a project, "Maritime Piracy", in close cooperation with Eurojust and INTERPOL. Europol and INTERPOL have also joined forces with the US Naval Criminal Investigative Service (USNCIS), and the three organisations have agreed a set of guidelines on how to properly investigate cases of maritime piracy.

Europol and INTERPOL also work closely with other international and regional bodies against maritime piracy, including the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the International Maritime Organisation (IMO) and the International Maritime Bureau (IMB).

OPERATIONAL AND LEGAL SUCCESS

This coordinated approach has started meeting with some success. Here's an example.

On 4 January 2013, a Cypriot merchant ship sailing off the coast of Somalia put out a distress call to say that it had been attacked by a number of men who were armed with rocket-propelled grenades. Counter-piracy warships from NATO and the EU NAVFOR closed the sea area and located two suspect vessels, which had been fended off by the ship's security team. A team from one ship boarded the two vessels and apprehended 12 men, who were sent to Mauritius for prosecution.

The transfer was made possible by an agreement that the EU and Mauritius had signed two years earlier and that allows the transfer to the island nation of those suspected of committing an act of piracy off the coast of Somalia. The latest convictions under it were of the 12 pirates who had tried to hijack the Cypriot ship.

Support for Operation EU NAVFOR

The EU NAVFOR operation off the coast of Somalia is the largest of its kind against piracy. Over 200 hostages captured by pirates have been rescued directly by EU NAVFOR since the operation began in 2008.

Europol is playing a role here, too: it is supporting EU NAVFOR in the development of a system to keep track of all relevant information on all cases of maritime piracy. It shares criminal intelligence to identify and disrupt the criminal enterprises involved.

This work has broad international support: in 2010 the United Nations Security Council unanimously endorsed a resolution that called on all Member States to work with Europol and INTERPOL in the fight against the criminal networks involved in maritime piracy.

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