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## Somali piracy offers huge new market for private security

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NAIROBI - Protecting ships in Somalia's pirate-infested waters could be the next big thing for the world's ever-growing private security industry but the legalities are complex, experts said Friday.

Last week's hijacking of a Saudi super-tanker worth a quarter of a billion dollars has raised the issue of onboard security for the world's merchant fleet, which carries an estimated 90 percent of the planet's traded goods.

"This could be the biggest new market since Iraq... the potential is huge. The legal implications need to be carefully considered, but I think we're heading there," said a private security consultant based in Nairobi.

On November 15, it took pirates only 16 minutes to board the Sirius Star. The supertanker is 330 metres (1,000 feet) long but has a crew of only 25 and no defence systems, making it vulnerable to a handful of pirates with speedboats and guns.

Foreign navies are rushing to the Gulf of Aden, a key trade route between Asia and Europe, but pirates proved their ability to dodge warships and many experts argue there is little international deterrence efforts can achieve.

Nick Davis, head of UK-based Anti-Piracy Maritime Security Solutions, argued that onboard security will have to be considered.

"Now anywhere between Singapore and Cape Town is unsafe without onboard security. What the ships need to do is be properly protected and ensure that the ship's security is sufficiently up-to-date," he told AFP.

London-based insurance brokers Swinglehurst announced late last month a partnership for "protected Gulf of Aden voyages" with Britain's Hart Security, a leading provider of maritime security founded by a former officer of the elite SAS regiment, Lord Westbury.

Hart Security was hired by the authorities of Puntland, a breakaway region of Somalia where the pirate bases are located, a decade ago to combat piracy but the contract only lasted a couple of years.

Other companies are clearly viewing anti-piracy as a new gold mine.

"Everybody is talking about it, there certainly is a very large potential market here. It's not only Somalia, but the Gulf of Guinea -- where you have oil -- and the Bay of Bengal," said Bernard Jacquemart, head of information and analysis for Paris-based Securite Sans Frontieres.

"A framework remains to be determined for such operations. The question is can you have armed men on ships? The trend that is emerging would tend to say yes," he said.

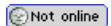
In responding to pirate attacks, ships need to either outpace their enemy, enhance their security systems or have armed personnel on board.

The first solution is virtually impossible since pirates operate from speedboats. Targeted vessels generally have a matter of minutes between the moment they realise they are being attacked and the moment pirates board.

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Yet engaging in an exchange of fire with pirates armed with rocket-propelled grenades is risky and could have disastrous environmental consequences with single hull ships.

Blackwater, one of the world's best-known and largest security companies, has already offered its services and announced that one of its ships, the McArthur, was already in the region.

"We have been contacted by ship owners who say they need our help in making sure those goods get to their destination safely. The McArthur can help us accomplish that," Blackwater vice president Bill Matthews said recently.

Such a ship would essentially be given escort and surveillance duties, Blackwater spokeswoman Anne Tyrell told AFP, arguing that the cost of hiring such an escort would more than offset the cost in higher insurance.

"We say that going armed is probably not the best idea because it wouldn't thwart attacks and probably lead to an escalation of force," she said.

Many companies stress training for the crew and other other passive security measures should be a priority.

"Armed guards sounds good, sounds sexy but there are a lot of legalities. I'd like to see what happens when private security starts shooting people," said Orlando Wilson, from Risks Incorporated.

"We've had a lot of calls... We could possibly get people on board with guns but we want to know who's covering us if things go bad. What laws are they going to be covered by?" he asked.

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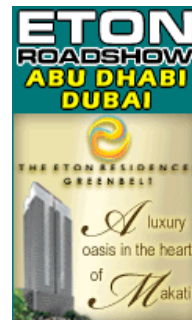


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