

Piracy on the High Seas Is Alive and Flourishing — What Should You Do?

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Blackbeard and Captain Kidd could easily fit in with the cutthroats that still roam our seaways today. These seafaring bandits could cost you dearly -- not only in terms of stolen merchandise, but also your life.

Attacks on the High Seas are Rising

Attacks on unarmed merchant shipping vessels more than doubled last year to 224, according to the International Maritime Bureau, an affiliate of the International Chamber of Commerce.

And this figure is low. Many incidents go unreported because shipowners fear rising insurance premiums, demands for higher pay from crews and bad publicity that could cost them shipping contracts.

Modern day buccaneers plunder hundreds of cargoes each year from unprotected merchant shipping. The booty ranges from commodities such as sugar to consumer items like cameras, computers and VCRs. Occasionally the theft even involves the ship itself — the entire vessel is hijacked, the crew is set adrift in lifeboats, and the vessel is reregistered in a third world nation under a new name.

Who They are and Where They Operate

In the past, small-time pilferers typically boarded vessels in port at night. Today, however, more prevalent organized criminal gangs increasingly utilize insider information to target high value containers. Brazil is becoming known for this type of criminal activity.

Violence against crews is also rising and is of particular concern. Only one of the first seven attacks reported this year did not involve some form of crew violence. Even vessels at sea are not safe, as heavily armed thieves in high speed motorboats board vessels in transit. A hot spot for this modus operandi is Indonesia, where vessels have to slow down in the narrow channels, and there are thousands of islands to offer pirates a safe haven.

Last year alone there were 57 attacks reported in this area. Other areas with high incidence of attacks reported include Brazil (16), Vietnam/Thailand (15) and India (26).

Although the most attacks took place on general freighters, probably due to the diversity and accessibility of cargo, overall the attacks were fairly well distributed among all types of vessels. Even bulk carriers and tankers were attacked, primarily for payroll and crew valuables.

Authorities Provide Little Help

Authorities do not seem anxious to tangle with groups of well armed pirates or to invoke piracy laws that have not been revised since the mid- 1800's. The word piracy invokes images of Treasure Island, which makes it difficult to convince law enforcement authorities to take the threat seriously, but these crimes are costing more than \$200 million per year, not to mention the cost of human life.

What You Should Do

To protect yourself, prior to arriving in a high risk zone, establish a communication schedule with local authorities. This will help reduce response time, and is your primary means of protection, until government authorities make changes. However, you must also remember to always follow the standard procedure of no resistance. No cargo is worth losing a life.