PIRACY ON THE INCREASE

It was announced on 21st October by the International Chamber of Commerce’s International Maritime Bureau (IMB) in both London and Kuala Lumpur that global piracy figures have already surpassed the total number of attacks recorded in 2008. It was also revealed that the total number of incidents in which guns were used had risen by more than 200%, compared to the corresponding period in 2008. A total of 306 incidents were reported to the IMB Piracy Reporting Centre (PRC) in the first nine months of 2009, while in 2008, the total number of attacks for the year was 293.

This increase in attacks is directly attributed to heightened piracy activity off the Somali Coast, where 47 incidents were reported compared to just 12 for the same period of the previous year, and in the Gulf of Aden, which had 100 incidents compared to 51 for the same period of the previous year. Despite the overall rise in figures, there has been a decrease in the number of incidents recorded in the third quarter of 2009 (63 incidents) compared to the first and second quarters of 2009, which recorded 103 and 140 incidents respectively. The decrease in piracy activity in that period in the Gulf of Aden and off the East Coast of Somalia can be credited primarily to monsoons. Global piracy statistics reveal that in the first nine months of 2009, 114 vessels were boarded, 34 vessels hijacked and 88 vessels fired upon. A total of 661 crewmembers were taken hostage, 12 kidnapped, six killed and eight reported missing.

There has been a marked decrease globally, however, in the number of vessels hijacked in the first nine months of 2009, compared to the same period in 2008 – from an average of one in 6.4 vessels in 2008 to one in nine vessels in 2009. The third quarter report showed that Somali pirates have extended their reach, threatening not only the Gulf of Aden and East Coast of Somalia but also the southern region of the Red Sea, the Bab el Mandab Straits and the East Coast of Oman. This area still ranks as the number one piracy hotspot, with a total of 168 incidents reported in the first three quarters of 2009, accounting for more than half of the overall number of reported attacks.

“Naval vessels operating off the Coast of Somalia continue to play a critical role in containing the piracy threat,” said IMB Director Captain Pottengal Mukundan. He added, “Enhanced security measures by vessels have also made it difficult for pirates to succeed in their attacks. It is vital that regions
in Somalia such as Puntland continue to take firm action in investigating and prosecuting the pirates. This will be a far better deterrent against Somali pirates than prosecution and punishment in a foreign country.”

A total of 32 vessels were hijacked by Somali pirates in the first nine months of 2009, with 533 crew members taken hostage. A further 85 vessels were fired upon and as of 30 September 2009, four vessels, with over 80 crew held hostage, were still under negotiation. Nigeria remains another area of high concern. While only 20 attacks were officially reported to IMB in 2009, information received from external sources indicates that at least 50% of attacks on vessels, mostly related to the oil industry, have gone unreported. The IMB report noted that of the 20 incidents reported, eight were in the waters around Lagos. Chittagong port in Bangladesh has also seen an increase in the number of incidents as compared to the same period in 2008. There have been 12 reported attacks so far in 2009 –10 successfully carried out – compared to nine for the same period in 2008, when all the vessels were successfully boarded and looted. The South China Sea has once again proven to be an area of concern and enhanced risk, with 10 incidents reported so far in 2009. This is the highest recorded number of incidents in the corresponding period over the last five years. Additionally, all of the attacks were successful and in some of the incidents the bridge of the vessel was left unmanned for some time. IMB urges all ship masters, owners and managers, and others involved in the shipping industry, to report piracy or armed robbery incidents to its PRC. The PRC is located in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia and is the only 24-hour manned centre able to receive and process reports of attacks from around the world. This timely, first hand information from ship masters enables IMB to identify high-risk areas to the governments concerned and is the first essential step in the attack response chain.