

World Sea Piracy Surges; Focus on Somalia, Benin

KUALA LUMPUR, Malaysia (AP) — Sea piracy worldwide has surged this year, with Somali pirates intensifying their attacks and Benin emerging as a new hotspot, a global maritime watchdog said Tuesday.

There have been a record 352 attacks in the first nine months of this year, up 22 percent from a year ago, the Kuala Lumpur-based International Maritime Bureau's Piracy Reporting Center said in a statement. Somali pirates accounted for 199 attacks of those attacks, a 58 percent increase from last year, as they expanded farther into the Red Sea.

The pirates also showed unprecedented boldness by hijacking a chemical tanker at anchor in an Omani port in August, the center said.

While attacks are up, Somali pirates managed to hijack only 24 vessels, down from 35 in the same period last year. That is thanks to international naval policing and onboard security measures, the group said.

"Somali pirates are finding it harder to hijack ships and get the ransom they ask for," said International Maritime Bureau Director Captain Pottengal Mukundan. "The navies deserve to be complimented on their excellent work. They are a vital force in deterring and disrupting pirate activity."

Globally, the organization said pirates took 625 hostages, killed eight people and injured 41 in the nine-month period.

It said the coast off the west African nation of Benin has seen 19 attacks, with eight tankers hijacked. There were no such incidents in 2010.

In most cases, pirates force the ship to sail to an unknown location, where they steal ship cargo and the crew's belongings before releasing the vessel.

Benin has begun joint naval patrols with neighboring Nigeria. The center hailed this as a positive step but said the capture and punishment of pirates is the best deterrent.

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