

Statement of Frank R. Lautenberg

Hearing: Piracy on the High Seas: Protecting our Ships, Crews, and Passengers

Tuesday, May 5, 2009

Many of us thought that pirates were something from the past, found only in history books and movies.

But pirates are back on the high seas.

On April 8th, the U.S.-flagged ship Maersk Alabama was transporting food to Kenya when it was attacked by four Somali pirates.

The twenty 20 crew members stood up to the pirates and eventually retook their ship.

But their captain was taken hostage.

So the U.S. Navy's Special Forces were called upon to secure the captain's release, and they succeeded.

Captain Richard Phillips and Chief Engineer Michael Perry from the Alabama are with us today. I want to thank you for being here—and commend you for your bravery at sea.

But as the nation focused on the Alabama incident, another attack on a U.S.-flagged ship occurred.

Only five days after the Alabama attack, Somali pirates attacked the U.S.-flagged ship, the Liberty Sun.

The vessel—and its crewmen—were fired on by pirates and escaped by outmaneuvering them.

We have video footage from that attack we will play in this hearing. While the video is choppy, it certainly shows how the crew acted decisively to ward off the attack by the pirates.

Despite the Liberty Sun's daring escape, the ship was stuck at port in Kenya as its attackers waited offshore for its return to sea.

The Liberty Sun was docked in Kenya for nearly three weeks and the ship finally left the port this past Sunday.

Today, I hope the Navy will tell us how they can ensure safe passage in the future.

In 2008, there were one-hundred-eleven 111 pirate attacks off the Horn of Africa, almost double the number in 2007.

And this year alone, there have already been eighty-six 86 attacks. As a result of these attacks, nearly three hundred 300 non-U.S. crew members are being held prisoner by Somali pirates.

Pirates are now attacking ships over more than two million square miles of ocean—more than half the size of the United States.

In addition to the lives they threaten, these pirates threaten supplies for American troops who are serving abroad, humanitarian relief bound for East Africa and commercial shipping across the world.

These bandits have to be stopped. Violence and lawlessness will not be tolerated, whether on land, in the sky, or at sea.

We have a duty to protect the ships that proudly fly America's flag—and our nation's military is our partner in fulfilling that duty.

A timid approach will not do. We need to take bold action to keep our seas and ship crews safe.

I understand the Coast Guard is in the process of updating their security policies for commercial ships, known as the MARSEC Security Directive.

This is long overdue and it needs to be completed.

And the international community needs to have a strong united front against these bandits of the sea.

The International Maritime Organization has one hundred sixty-eight 168 member nations—they must all band together to prosecute and stop piracy in this region.

I look forward to hearing more from our witnesses so that we can take the appropriate steps to eliminate these threats to our ships, passengers and crew.