

INTERNATIONAL TRADE UNION CONFEDERATION (ITUC)

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Spotlight on Alexander Dimitrevich (Ukrainian Marine Trade Union Federation)

Who speaks of the human cost of maritime piracy?

Brussels, 12 October 2011 (ITUC OnLine): Born into a seafaring Odessa family, Alexander Dimitrevitch is an ex-Chief Purser on cruise ships. Currently the Special Councillor on Foreign Relations and Social Issues to the President of the Ukrainian Marine Trade Union Federation, he is also an expert on maritime piracy and a member of the International Maritime Piracy Humanitarian Response Programme.

Against a background of ever more sophisticated pirate attacks and the legal maze, he hopes that the new Maritime Piracy Humanitarian Response Programme will help combat this phenomenon, which has a huge human as well as financial cost

It seems the world is finally waking up to the scourge of piracy on the high seas. Can you tell us why it's such a big problem?

Well, let's go back to basics. I'm constantly surprised how little the general public know about the importance of shipping - and of course seafarers - to the world economy. Around 80 to 90 per cent of all the goods we use and buy are carried by sea. That computer you're using, that shirt you're wearing, that coffee you're drinking - it's pretty much all been shipped by sea.

So anything that affects shipping and the lives and work of seafarers has the most profound effect on all of us. Nobody knows the exact figure, but piracy around the world - not just off the coast of Somalia, but in many other places too - is costing the world economy around US\$10-billion a year. This is just in pure money terms: higher shipping rates, increased insurance premiums, the cost of security, the deployment of naval forces, vessels having to be re-routed, etc., etc.

And we're not even talking about the terror and trauma suffered by the thousands of working seafarers who have been killed, captured or held to ransom by pirates.

There are many piracy hotspots, but without doubt the most notorious is the Horn of Africa, off the coast of war-torn Somalia. How can a relatively small group of men from a so-called "failed State" seemingly hold the whole world to ransom?

How to deal with piracy is a hugely complicated subject. Every nation seems to have its own ideas on how to best deal with the problem. For example, the "risk zone" off Somalia is a huge area, twice the size of Europe.

We may have a situation where a ship is owned by a Ukrainian, but registered in Malta. The crew are Indian and Filipino nationals. The cargo was loaded in China and destined for the U.S. market. The attack takes place in international waters. Who has jurisdiction, who has legal claim? It's a legal labyrinth. And as yet no-one has come up with an answer that meets with universal approval.

The pirates have been able to exploit these differences. Their tactics have evolved and become increasingly sophisticated. They are extremely well armed and are now using 'mother' ships far out to sea from which to launch their attacks.

These guys are not a bunch of drunken sailors, like those depicted in cartoons! As fighters and tacticians, they're as good as the best marine commandos.

What is the rationale behind the International Maritime Piracy Humanitarian Response Programme?

The programme was initiated by the ITF (International Transport Workers Federation) Seafarers Trust and started in December, 2010. The basic premise is to identify and implement Good Practice in response to piracy.

We know that piracy exists, but there is no unified response to the problem. And this is compounding the problem. For example, how do companies treat the families of seafarers who have been affected by piracy? At what point should a seafarer who has been released from pirate captivity be repatriated? To what extent does the mere fear of piracy affect the working lives of seafarers? All these questions need to be answered.

For me the response to piracy falls into three basic areas - the humanitarian response, the legal aspects and the physical protection of vessels. These are connected but very separate issues.

Many of the world's navies have now increased their deployment of warships patrolling pirate-infested waters. Do you think it a good idea to also arm merchant vessels so that they can also protect themselves?

There's a lot of debate on this question. Should we arm seafarers with machine guns, electrical wire, water cannons?

But this is not an action movie. Why should civilian seafarers serving aboard a merchant vessel be armed and expected to shoot a pirate? Even professional soldiers and law enforcement officers get post-traumatic stress if they shoot someone. What happens to a seafarer?

What is the motivation for a seafarer? He might be underpaid. Maybe he's never met the owner of his vessel. Does he have a duty to guard the cargo? He might be an officer, an able seaman, a cook. People who have never been on board of a ship might give the advice to shoot. But it's much easier to give the advice, than to follow the advice.

Finally, shooting may make the situation far worse. The pirates may start to kill more seafarers. We are not sure who would win in a fire-fight. Pirates are not only armed with AK47 assault rifles; they also have heavy weapons. These are highly-trained fighters. They use six boats: two ahead, two astern, two alongside. Who takes the decision to fire at them? The captain of the ship or the military commander if there are armed guards on board? If you start a fire-fight, does this really protect the crew?

So from your point of view, what's the best way to protect seafarers, save lives and prevent kidnapping for ransom?

Until now it was thought that the best way to protect a vessel is to have armed guards on board, but I'm not so sure about this. For me the most effective method is to have a 'Citadel' onboard ship, a secure area which the crew can retreat to if under attack. It's not the only solution, but appears to be the best solution to avoid conflict between civilian seafarers and armed groups. Crucially, it would also give the crew enough time for the navy to come to their rescue."

What do you think about paying ransoms?

This is a very, very tough question. Employers have certain responsibilities to their crews. This is a question for the owners and operators who send seafarers into these zones.

But every time you pay ransom you are simply supporting a criminal business. This is not a political protest; it is a business. They get hostages, they get money, they release hostages. This is a business.

Many people say they should be treated as terrorists. But do they do the same level of harm? Perhaps they do economically, but they don't kill as many people.

Unlike many European nations, the Chinese, South Korean and Indian governments seemed to have adopted a hard line in their response to piracy. Is this the way forward?

If we declare open war on piracy, my serious concern is that the pirates would just automatically execute seafarers. Already we have some cases where ransoms for crews have been agreed but pirates have refused to release the Indian nationals amongst them in retaliation against the Indian government.

All-out war would strangle the world economy. Of course, the ultimate solution would be to bring peace and stability to Somalia. But even military intervention would not necessarily work. Just look at Afghanistan and Iraq. Anyone who could solve the Somali situation would win the Nobel Peace Prize!

You have interviewed a number of Ukrainian seafarers who have been victims of piracy. What did they tell you?

There are around 75,000 Ukrainian seafarers working around the world - the third largest contingent after the Philippines and India. So in this so-called Pirate War, Ukrainian seafarers are right on the frontline.

In the most severe ransom cases, I've heard of 12 people being crammed into a cabin for four - without air-con, not enough food, no fresh water, using a single toilet that doesn't work. I've heard of cases of guys being made to clean toilets with their bare hands, of mock executions. I've also heard about Ukrainian crews being split physically. They've started a conflict amongst crew.

This is one of the main reasons why we need crisis management training. We need to teach seafarers how not to provoke pirates, how to survive and how to remain resilient. It's difficult to reach out to Ukrainian victims of piracy. In Ukrainian culture it's not done to go and see a psychologist or psychiatrist. In our society it's like a stigma or shame. Some believe that a bottle of vodka is better than to go and see a doctor.

This is why the work of the International Maritime Piracy Humanitarian Response Programme is so important.

Interview by David Browne

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