Piracy attacks in the Malacca Strait

By Alex Dali

The Malacca Strait is one of the most important shipping lanes in the world. By using the Strait instead of the Indonesia's Lombok Straits, super-large tankers ferrying crude oil from the Middle East to the Far East can save up to 1,600 km -- roughly three days sailing time.

The present-day Malacca Strait is the world's second busiest commercial shipping lane (topped only by the Dover Strait in Britain) through which an average of 200 ships pass each day. For every ship that passes through, there is a risk not only of an accident and spill of cargo that might include crude oil, toxic chemicals, or radioactive substances but also of a piracy attack! The threat of an ecological catastrophe caused by such an attack cannot be ignored.

The Malacca Strait is very narrow -- at least for a supertanker - and also very crowded. Piracy attacks are often highly planned, with the whole operation being orchestrated from maritime centers. Sometimes the cargo has already been identified and sold before it has even been captured. Bulk commodities such as sugar, metals, and petrochemicals are key targets, as illustrated by an attack on the Malaysian tanker Petchem in September 2001.

Fig. 1: High risk areas for oil tankers on the Malacca Strait
Piracy has become so bad, particularly in Southeast Asian waters, that representatives of law enforcement agencies and shipping countries from around the world have gathered in Kuala Lumpur for a conference on how to deal with it. Attacks are on the increase throughout the world, but they are especially serious in Southeast Asia. The worst danger spots last year were Indonesia, the Strait of Malacca, Bangladesh, India, and Ecuador.

The International Chamber of Commerce (ICC) Piracy Report, 2001, has analysed the following trends in the year 2000, a record in number of attacks:

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<th>Year 1999</th>
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<td>300 cases</td>
<td>469 cases</td>
<td>365 cases</td>
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Fig. 2: Number of piracy attacks world-wide

Source: ICC Piracy Report, 2001
Malaysian authorities say pirates have kidnapped the captain of an Indonesian vessel and attacked a Malaysian ship off the coast of Borneo.

A Singaporean tanker chartered by Shell to transport oil and gas was hijacked by pirates in waters east of Kalimantan shortly after the tanker departed from Port Dickson in Malaysia in the Strait of Malacca. More piracy attacks occur in Indonesian waters than in any other place in the world, but they have been on the increase in and around Philippine waters, too.

The record of piracy attacks in the Malacca Strait in the year 2000 has forced the countries around the busiest shipping lanes to increase their controls. In its 2001 report, the ICC acknowledges important improvements: “There was a remarkable drop in the number of piracy attacks to 17 for the year 2001 compared with 75 for the year 2000. This is due to vigilant patrols and constant operations by the relevant authorities, particularly the Royal Malaysian Marine Police. Anti-piracy measures by the Malaysian and Singaporean authorities have been effective. However the shipping industry hopes that the Indonesian authorities will increase their efforts, without which the area will always remain high risk.”

**Organized crime rings**

ICC says the increase in hijackings is due to greater involvement in piracy by organized crime networks. "The hijacking of a whole ship and the resale of its cargo requires huge resources and detailed planning," said Pottengal Mukundan, Director of ICC's Commercial Crime Services. "It typically involves a mother ship from which to launch the attacks, a supply of automatic weapons, false identity papers for the crew and vessel, fake cargo documents, and a broker network to sell the stolen goods illegally. "Individual pirates don't have these resources. Hijackings are the work of organized crime rings."

**Some of the more notable piracy incidents were**

"At approximately 02:30 hours, when the duty (seaman) was opening the starboard bridge door of the wheel house, armed pirates attacked him," reads the report. "The seaman made to run but was slashed on his right knee with a long parang (machete)..." Having taken control of the tanker, the 21 pirates repainted the funnel to prevent identification and changed the name. Within 24 hours the entire 2,547-ton cargo of gas oil had been unloaded into another unmarked tanker.

"On Sunday 1-10-2000 the bulk Carrier MV Hazel 1 was attacked by pirates, armed with Pistols and Machetes, while the ship lay at anchor just outside Singapore port waters. The Indonesian-flagged vessel lay about 11 nautical miles south-west of Tuas at 01:13.15 N - 103:34.39E. The sleeping crew was overpowered and their hands and mouths were taped. The pirates ransacked the ship as well as stealing personal belongings and cash. They fled with more than US$10,000 (S$17,500) in cash and jewelry. Initially they also tried to take the ship with its cargo of Gypsum (used in construction materials) but failed because the ship's engines were dismantled for repairs. Eventually the crew managed to free themselves and radioed for help. The Esprit Shipping agency sent 6 more men to beef up the security of the vessel."
The global piracy statistics are compiled by ICC's Piracy Reporting Centre in Kuala Lumpur. The centre collects data on pirate activity and advises law enforcement, governments and seafarers. It transmits daily alerts to all ships in piracy hotspots (see website: www.icc-ccs.org). According to Captain Mukundan, there is a greater than ever need to report piracy and increase awareness worldwide, as highly organized and resourced criminal networks move into the field, and attacks at sea become increasingly deadly. The work of ICC's International Maritime Bureau with Indonesian authorities led to the recovery of the Malaysian tanker Selayang and the extradition of the pirates who captured the Inabukwa, an Indonesian vessel. These are just two recent cases highlighting the effectiveness of ICC's support to law enforcement in the fight against piracy. But Captain Mukundan warned that although the overall 2001 figures were down from the previous year, the fight against maritime crime has not been won. He said: "The year 2000 was an exceptionally bad year. Figures over a longer period show an underlying upward trend in piracy, and an increase in attacks that are well organized, well funded and violent."

![Map of the Malacca Strait with piracy hotspots](image)

**Fig. 3** : Combining the supervision of the Malacca Strait with patrols and radars

**New trend: "kidnap and ransom"**

The annual report on piracy at sea of the International Chamber of Commerce also notes that a new trend of 'kidnap and ransom' piracy was also observed in the Malacca Strait (waters around Aceh, Indonesia), a phenomenon earlier restricted to Somali waters.

Two cases have been reported off Aceh involving MT Tirta Niaga IV and TB Ocean Silver. The Free Aceh Movement (GAM), which had threatened to disrupt shipping in the
Strait of Malacca, was blamed for the incidents by the Indonesian authorities. Shipping companies privately confess to attacks on their vessels but prefer not to report them. Victims of attacks are so traumatized that they often do not return to sea again. Unfortunately, ship owners fail to appreciate this fact and discourage their crew-members from reporting attacks.

According to the ICC report, the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 in the United States has been directed much concern towards the security of ports and ships. The report quotes: “It is not impossible that hijackers or terrorists could hijack ships, particularly LNG, LPG, or large tankers, to undertake suicide missions for their cause. Forged ship documents and crew travel documents can easily be obtained with the right connections!”

Political objectives and profits drive the terrorism phenomena of hijacking and piracy at sea. It threatens maritime enterprise and disturbs law and order at sea. It is proven that naval/coast guard patrols are the most effective way to deter piracy. Greater regional politico-maritime cooperation is needed to reduce and maybe suppress the problem.

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**Success against pirates:**

The vessel Juliana was hijacked in August 2000. About a month later the vessel was discovered at Bang Saen beach and had again been repainted and this time was renamed the Verona. Mr. Peng Yan Wing again went to the CSD and confirmed its identity. The captain and 16 crew members were taken into custody on 29 September. The Burmese captain Moo Zo Yee confirmed the repeated repainting and renaming of the Juliana. At the moment they are being held pending prosecution and trial.


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**Watchdog warns of tanker attacks**

*Ships carrying huge loads of highly flammable natural gas could be hijacked by terrorists and used in suicide attacks, a global piracy watchdog warned. Forged ship and crew travel documents can be easily obtained for tankers carrying oil or liquefied gases, facilitating their use by terrorists "to undergo suicide missions for their cause," the International Maritime Bureau's Piracy Reporting Centre said. "After the Sept. 11th terrorist attacks in the US, there is now a real fear that terrorists could use a ship as a weapon," a report by the centre said. "Security should become a top priority for the maritime industry."*


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For more information on the subject, consult the report “Disaster Risk Management in South-East Asia,” August 2001, A. Dali, (Study co-financed by the European Union working programme AsiaEcoBest). Contact publications@atlascope.com
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