Beat: Miscellaneous

Puntland forces rescue 22 hostages held by Somali pirates

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USPA News - Maritime police forces in the semi-autonomous Somali state of Puntland raided a Panama-flagged cargo vessel on Sunday and freed 22 people who had been held hostage by a group of Somali pirates for nearly three years, authorities said. The Puntland government said the action to rescue the nearly two dozen crew members began on December 10 when the Puntland Maritime Police Force (PMPF) surrounded the Panama-flagged MV Iceberg 1. The operation began after the region`s security agencies received information that all hostages were back on board the ship after earlier being held at different locations.

The maritime police forces first came under attack on December 11 when a group of suspected pirates attempted to bring weapons and ammunition supplies to the cargo vessel. Subsequent clashes between maritime police forces and the pirates resulted in the deaths of three suspected pirates and the capture of three others. Four government soldiers were also injured. The Puntland government said PMPF forces continued the operation on Sunday and were able to rescue all remaining 22 crew members, although their physical and mental conditions were not immediately known. "The hostages are now receiving nutrition and medical care," a statement said. MV Iceberg 1, with a deadweight of 4,500 tonnes, was carrying general mechanical equipment and was bound for Jebel Ali in the United Arab Emirates when it was hijacked by Somali pirates on March 29, 2010, when it was about 10 nautical miles (18.5 kilometers) from the Yemeni port of Aden. The ship`s master last reported that pirates had come on board and the vessel soon after began heading towards the Somali coast. The roll-on/roll-off vessel was initially carrying 24 crew members, including people from Yemen, India, Ghana, Sudan, Pakistan and the Philippines. But the ordeal took a toll on the crew members as they suffered from physical torture, illness and mental problems, leading to the suicide of one hostage and the suspected murder of a second. "Pirates have held hostage for ransom the vessel MV Iceberg 1 for over 2 years and 9 months, and some of the crewpersons have been killed and others have been mutilated and tortured," the Puntland government said in a statement earlier this month, adding that the pirates were armed with weapons such as AK-47 rifles and PKM machine-guns. Most hijackings usually end without casualties when a ransom has been paid, but the hijacking of the MV Iceberg 1 continued for an unprecedented time with no end in sight after the Dubai-based owner of the vessel abandoned its employees and reportedly refused to speak with their families. In recent years, Somali pirates have hijacked hundreds of ships, taking in hundreds of millions of dollars in ransom. But navy ships are now patrolling the shipping lanes near Somalia in an effort to prevent hijackings, reducing the number of known pirate attacks from about 174 in 2010 to just 35 so far this year. According to the European Union Naval Force - Somalia (EUNAVFOR), at least 114 people are currently still being held hostage by Somali pirates aboard 5 large vessels. An unknown number of Dhows and other smaller vessels, including their crew, are also being held by Somali pirates.

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