

News Release



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NATO Commander Reflects on 100 Days in Counter Piracy

On 6th June, Commodore Ben Bekkering took over as Commander of NATO's counter piracy mission, Operation Ocean Shield. Today, with ships patrolling the shipping corridor in the Gulf of Aden and present in front of the Somali coast, the Task Force remains ready to prevent successful pirate attacks.

Since then two merchant ships have been attacked by pirates however neither were successful. This represents a significant decline compared to previous periods. More importantly, no merchant ships have been hijacked by pirates since May. This does not mean that the pirates don't try. On two occasions over the Summer, they managed to hijack a dhow which could have been used as a mothership from which to launch attacks. On both occasions the pirates were disrupted by the NATO warships, HNLMS Evertsen and HNLMS Rotterdam but they still hold seven ships and 177 crewmembers hostage.

During September as the weather improves and fishermen go back out to sea, this is the time that the pirates resume their activities. By using calm seas and forcing dhows to move them to and around their hunting grounds, the pirates continue to seek opportunities to stalk and attack the many merchant ships that transit the vital shipping lanes around the Horn of Africa.

Lieutenant Commander Mac de Jong, staff officer on board the NATO flagship, HNLMS Rotterdam, is very happy with the declining success rates of the pirates. "We are not there yet, the success is still reversible. Therefore we need to seek ways to maximise the pressure. We are making considerable progress, we must now maintain the momentum."

NATO's Task Force has used the past monsoon period to gather information on areas where pirates may venture out at sea. Using surveillance by aircraft and ships along the coast where the seas allowed pirates to operate, NATO has built up a good picture of what has been happening along the coast of Somalia.

As NATO warships patrol off the coast of Somalia, it presents an excellent opportunity to invite local elders and community leaders to meet NATO at sea. Commodore Ben Bekkering explains: “By meeting village elders and explaining to the villagers what we do and why, we hope to build trust, exchange information and ensure that the improving maritime safety and security will also benefit them.”

From these meetings it is clear that the local populations strongly oppose piracy and will do all they can to work with the international counter piracy effort. Bekkering adds, “I am sure that in the villages we found new partners. They can play a vital role to put more pressure on the pirates. If we can drive the pirates out, it will have a positive effect on the development of the region.”

NATO is working alongside EUNAVFOR, Combined Maritime Forces and individual nations to tackle acts of piracy. By joining forces, counter piracy efforts are more effective and can achieve more than any one ship, navy, organisation or country working alone.

Background Information:

NATO has contributed to the international counter piracy effort off the Horn of Africa since December 2008. The mission has expanded from escorting UN and World Food Programme Shipping under Operation Allied Provider and protecting merchant traffic in the Gulf of Aden under Operation Allied Protector. In addition to these activities and as part of the latest mission, Operation Ocean Shield, NATO is working with other international bodies to help develop capacity of countries in the region to tackle piracy on their own.

Standing NATO Maritime Group 1 is permanently assigned to NATO. It is a multi-national Naval Group that provides the NATO Alliance with the ability to quickly respond to crisis situations anywhere in the world. A capable, stand-alone task group and one of four standing maritime elements that form a flexible core around which NATO can build a larger force to meet a wide range of missions that will include non-combatant evacuations, consequence management, counter terrorism, crisis response, embargo operations, etc.

NATO Allies agreed on 19 March 2012 to extend Operation Ocean Shield for a further two years until the end of 2014.

NATO Forces currently in Operation Ocean Shield:

HNLMS Rotterdam (flagship) The Netherlands
USS Halyburton (United States of America)

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