

Somali pirate with references seeks work

MOGADISHU, SOMALIA: For a fearsome pirate, even one in self-declared retirement, there is a notable lack of what literature has led one to expect: cutlass, eye-patch, hook or even a parrot.



Instead, Mohamed Abdi Hassan, one of Somalia's - if not the world's - most notorious pirates, appears far more businessman than sea bandit, as he explains why he now wants to end the murderous hijacking of ships.

Hassan, better known as "Afweyne" or "Big Mouth", whose men once terrorised vast stretches of the Indian Ocean - generating millions of dollars in ransoms from seized ships - now claims to have renounced piracy.

"The young men need to be trained, to get skills and get integrated into society," Afweyne said, pulling from his briefcase an official letter apparently nominating him as an "anti-piracy officer".

Afweyne, who says he earned his nickname as a child "because I would cry a lot", claims to have persuaded almost a thousand young pirates to quit.

"We are convincing the youths to give up piracy. I have influence and have been mobilising the community to keep the men from the water," he told AFP over a cup of tea in an upmarket hotel in Somalia's war-ravaged capital Mogadishu.

Last year a United Nations report described Afweyne as "one of the most notorious and influential leaders" in Somalia.

Pirate attacks

Pirate attacks have in recent years been launched as far as 3,655km from the Somali coast in the Indian Ocean.

The World Bank last month calculated between US\$315m and US\$385m has been paid in ransoms since 2005, a figure dwarfed by the estimated US\$18bn that piracy costs the world economy annually.

But Afweyne, a soft spoken and portly man in his fifties with an apparently kindly manner, shuns descriptions of himself as a pirate, and especially the Somali translation of "burcad badeed", literally, the "scum of the sea".

"Perhaps you have heard a lot about this ship or that ransom but 90% of what you hear in Somalia is false," he said, opening his arms wide and chuckling to laugh-off any suggestion he was dangerous.

"I'm not saying I was not involved, for I was the one who initiated the fight," he said, claiming he took up piracy after his fishing company was ruined by foreign fleets off Somalia after the country spiralled into civil war in 1991.

"It was legitimate because there was no government, we were like orphans without a father," he added.

Job opportunities needed on land

Afweyne, whose son is reportedly a feared pirate chief, was involved in the 2008 capture of the Saudi-owned Sirius Star oil supertanker, released for a ransom of several million dollars.

His or his son's men were also involved in the 2008 capture of the MV Faina, a Ukrainian transport ship carrying 33 refurbished Soviet-era battle tanks, which was released after a 134-day hijack for a reported US\$3m.

Afweyne also reportedly carried out a string of attacks against ships carrying food aid to his impoverished nation.

In recent years, international naval patrols from China, the European Union, United States and Russia have protected shipping and fought off pirate vessels, with the rates of attack tumbling by 80% between 2011 and 2012, according to the EU's anti-piracy mission in Somalia, EUNAVFOR.

But Afweyne says long-term change is not just about making changes at sea. "(The patrols) have done a lot of good, but we need efforts on land too," he said.

Training and support

"Money for training and support to allow the pirates to turn their lives around is also key," he says.

"We need financial support to allow (ex-pirates) to have new careers. To be fishermen, farmers or traders - whatever they choose," he says.

Cynics argue that Afweyne has made his money, and now wants to invest the cash in businesses. Others suggest he is partly driven by condemnation that the pirates of his Saleban clan have tarnished the international reputation of all the Somali people.

Last year he was reportedly given a diplomatic passport by Somalia's then president, Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed, as an inducement to dismantle his pirate network.

But whatever his motivation - and however hard it may be to stimulate economic growth in the lawless pirate regions -- Afweyne's influence is important.

Somalia's weak government - propped up by a 17,000-strong African Union force - does not control the key areas where pirates operate, which are largely along the northern coast in the autonomous Puntland region.

"We want the government and the international community to help us provide opportunities for our young men," said Hassan Abdullahi Mohammed, a senior official from the Himan and Heeb region, a key pirate area, where several hostages remain.

Ships still held

While the pirates have lost ground, the International Maritime Bureau (IMB) warns that Somalia's waters are an extremely

high-risk.

Five boats and 77 hostages are still held by Somali pirates, according to the IMB, while some pirates have turned to land-based kidnapping and banditry instead.

But Somalia's government is slowly boosting its control over its territory, helped by military advances made against Islamist forces by African Union and government troops, with the economy and trade growing as security slowly improves. Business in the country's ports is booming.

At Mogadishu's port, numbers of large ships offloading goods - and this year exporting livestock for the first time in over two decades - have grown by around a 20% in the past year.

Other ex-pirates seem supportive of Afweyne's move, but warn that efforts to stop piracy must involve solid changes on the ground.

Ex-pirate captain Abdullahi Abdi said he cannot promise that those he commanded, who are now jobless onshore, have given up attacks for good.

"I can't say that," he said. "There are hundreds of young men wanting a future - and a young hungry man can do anything," Abdi says.

Source: AFP via I-Net Bridge

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