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Chamber of Shipping
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INTERCARGO
International Association of Dry Cargo Shipowners



INTERIM INDUSTRY TRANSIT ADVICE, SOUTHERN RED SEA, AND GULF OF ADEN – 15 DECEMBER 2023

SITUATION

Houthi rebels in Yemen have continued to attack international shipping.

After the Houthi forces hijacked a car carrier on 19 November 2023, further attacks by armed skiffs, drones or anti-ship missiles have occurred. Houthis have demanded vessels to head for the Houthi-controlled port of Hodeida where hijacking and hostage-taking might follow. Military sources indicate that Houthi have also been masquerading as Yemeni Coastguard officials.

It had appeared that Houthis are threatening vessels they believe as having direct affiliation / links with Israel, Israeli nationals or ships directly associated with the Saudi-led coalition involved in the Houthi conflict with the Yemeni government. However, information related to vessels involved in more recent attacks did not indicate any immediate affiliation with Israel, Israeli nationals, nor links to the conflict.

The Houthi's information source and accuracy is not known, ships should maintain a heightened awareness for potential collateral damage when transiting the region and disregard Houthi demands to divert course.

Ships with AIS switched on and off have been attacked. Switching off AIS makes it marginally more difficult to track a ship but may also hinder the ability of the military to provide support or direct contact. International Maritime Organisation (IMO) Circular A1106(29) para 22 outlines the use of AIS. It states that, "If the master believes that the continual operation of AIS might compromise the safety and security of his/her ship or where security incidents are imminent, the AIS may be switched off." Limiting the information in AIS data fields or switching off AIS could make a ship harder to locate but it is unlikely to ultimately prevent an attack. Limiting AIS data to the mandatory fields and omitting the next port of call (NPOC) could be considered.

THREAT CONSIDERATIONS

In the past, Houthi forces have attacked merchant shipping using antiship missiles, water-borne improvised explosive devices (WBIED), and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV). Furthermore, they have laid mines to protect port entries for ports under their control, and on rare occasion such mines have become detached from their tether and have drifted into the traffic lanes.

The current maritime threat from the Houthi forces is greater in vicinity of the Yemeni Red Sea coastline where they are present.

While the airborne threat from helicopters cannot be ruled out during hours of darkness it is probably greater during daylight hours where targets are more easily identified and attacked/boarded. The challenge of visually detecting and classifying small contacts at night, such as a water-borne improvised explosive devices (WBIED), remains.

Recent attacks using drones and anti-ship missiles have also been carried out during hours of darkness. Maintaining lookouts during the entire passage, regardless of timing, is necessary.

Ship operators which have called, or plan to call, Israeli ports should limit information access. Published information could be used by the Houthis.

As per BMP 5, ships planning a passage through the Southern Red Sea and Gulf of Aden should conduct a thorough ship and voyage specific threat and risk assessment considering any additional advice from their flag State. These assessments should include a specific update with input from official sources such as UKMTO for the period of operation, the latest update from relevant shipping associations, ownership details, and trading history of the ship in the last 3 years.

ROUTING CONSIDERATIONS

Ship owners, operators, managers, and staff should regularly evaluate the risks to their ships, including navigation and collision avoidance, and plan routes accordingly.

The Master retains ultimate responsibility for ensuring vessel safety and security.

Note that the Bab el-Mandeb Strait is narrow and when passing north bound, ships within the Traffic Separation Scheme will be no more than approximately 7 nautical miles from the Yemeni coastline.

The industry recommendation to use the Maritime Security Transit Corridor (MSTC) remains unchanged in light of the recent attack. The MSTC is the amalgamation of the Internationally Recommended Transit Corridor (IRTC), the Bab el-Mandeb Traffic Separation Scheme and the Traffic Separation Scheme West of Hanish Islands, and a two-way route directly connecting the IRTC and the Bab el-Mandeb Traffic separation Scheme.

VESSEL HARDENING CONSIDERATIONS

Hardening measures are described in BMP5 and advice on the website www.maritimeglobalsecurity.org can be applied in areas of the ship where insertion of armed men by helicopter may be likely. The use of citadels / safe areas has proven to be successful in preventing the hijackers taking over the control of the ships. This has also provided valuable time for the Naval vessels within the areas to arrive for assistance. Use of citadel requires thorough preparation and understanding of advantages and pitfalls – the guidelines in BMP5 applies.

CONSIDERATIONS REGARDING ARMED GUARDS

Complete a thorough risk assessment when considering the use of armed guards. Caution should be taken when managing their employment and rules of engagement should consider the risk of escalation.

REPORTING

In the event of any incident, suspicious activity, or concern:

- Report any suspicious activity or concerns to the UKMTO at watchkeepers@ukmto.org **+44 2392 222060**
- If under attack, please contact US Naval Forces in Bahrain directly on **+973 1785 3879**

This advice will be updated.
