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U.S. warships surround hijacked vessel

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U.S. warships off the coast of Somalia have surrounded a Ukrainian cargo ship hijacked last week by Somali pirates and carrying massive quantities of Russian weapons to Sudan.

Navy Fifth Fleet spokeswoman Cmdr. Jane Campbell told The Washington Times by telephone from Bahrain Monday that ships from the U.S. Fifth Fleet had moved into the vicinity of the hijacked vessel, Faina, anchored near the Somali port city of Hobyo.

"Our effort and mission is based out of concern for the safety of the crew and ensuring that the cargo is not off-loaded, where it could end up in the wrong hands," she said.

A Russian naval vessel is en route to the area, according to Russian news services.

The vessel, carrying arms and 33 tanks, was initially said to be bound for Kenya.

The incident highlights a growing problem of piracy off the East Horn of Africa, a trend that affects both merchant ships and humanitarian aid to the unstable region.

Josette Sheeran, executive director of the U.N. World Food Program, said Monday that the Canadian navy was protecting ships delivering U.N. food to Somalia.

"We need naval escort," she told the [Women's Foreign Policy Group](#) in Washington. "Canada came to the rescue for the next three weeks. [After that], I have no idea how we'll get food into Somalia."

Somali pirates have attacked more than 60 vessels this year off the Somali coast and adjoining Gulf of Aden, according to the International Maritime Bureau, which called the onslaught the biggest spike in piracy in modern times.

Earlier this month, a German shipowner paid ransom to Somali pirates to release one of his ships. The pirates aboard the Ukrainian-operated freighter told reporters by telephone that they want \$20 million to release the ship and its cargo of T-72 tanks, rifles and ammunition.

"Piracy has boomed off the coast of the Horn of Africa in recent years in part due to continued anarchy in Somalia," said Jim Phillips, a senior Africa analyst at the Heritage Foundation. Mr. Phillips said the pirates appear to be affiliated with clan-based groups, some of which may be aligned with al Qaeda. But he said he was not aware of any cases in which al Qaeda operatives have resorted to piracy themselves.

Fred Burton, a former U.S. counterintelligence operative, said that links with jihadists aren't clear.

"For some time now, there've been concerns that this region has been a safe haven for al Qaeda," said Mr. Burton, now vice president for counterterrorism at the risk-management company Stratfor. "From a command-and-control perspective, that scares the U.S. intelligence community."

The possibility that ransom payments are going to al Qaeda is worrisome, he said.

"When a ransom gets paid, you have to ask where that money goes," he said. He said he thinks the money is going "to re-fund their tactical capacity, to buy better boats and guns."

Navy officials on Monday reported that an unspecified number of U.S. destroyers and cruisers have joined the San Diego-based destroyer USS Howard within a 10-mile radius of the captive Ukrainian ship, which is carrying 20 crew members of Russian, Ukrainian and Latvian nationality. One crew member reportedly died from a heart attack. The Faina, while operated by a Ukrainian company, is flying a Belize flag.

With a Russian ship reportedly on its way to the area, Mr. Burton said the U.S. Navy will stay in the area to make sure the cargo doesn't fall into the hands of insurgents.

"I would imagine that there is a lot of cable traffic between the State Department and Defense Department and Moscow, with Washington saying 'We'll hold the perimeter until you get here,'" he said.

Mr. Burton and others also mentioned an unconfirmed news report in the South African newspaper, the Sunday Times. On Sunday, the newspaper reported that Somali pirates who hijacked an Iranian ship suffered skin burns, hair loss and other ills within days of boarding the ship MV Iran Deyanat.

The paper said that some Somalis died, and that the ship's declared cargo included "minerals" and "industrial products." It said that officials involved in negotiations "are convinced that it was sailing for Eritrea to deliver small arms and chemical weapons to Somalia's Islamist rebels."

cThis article is based in part on wire service reports.