



The Humanitarian Response: Seafarers Health and Welfare

Can We Declare Victory and Go Home?

Douglas B. Stevenson

It appears that the tide is turning for Somali pirates. For the first time since Somali pirates captured international attention in 2007, attacks on merchant shipping in waters off Somalia are down. Governments and shipping interests are cautiously optimistic, attributing improvements to increased naval patrols coupled with more aggressive naval tactics, more criminal prosecutions, greater implementation of the maritime industry's Best Management Practices (BMPs), and widespread employment of private armed security teams. While considerable progress has been achieved on deterring and preventing pirate attacks, much work remains for helping seafarers who have been affected by piracy.

Though the numbers of pirate attacks and captures are down for 2012, far too many seafarers continue to be held hostage. As of the end of March 9, 2012 ships and 236 seafarers were held hostage by Somali pirates.¹ Since 2006, pirates have kidnapped or taken hostage more than 4,500 seafarers, and they have robbed or attacked many more. What happened to the seafarers after their release or after being attacked? Did they continue their seafaring careers? Are they fit to work on ships? Do they need continuing medical attention? Do they receive medical attention? Where they compensated for lost wages and personal property stolen by the pirates? Where do they get help to deal with the aftermath of surviving a piracy incident?

Sadly, despite recent efforts to address caring for seafarers' and their families who have been affected by piracy, the answers to these questions remain largely unanswered.

In 2007, the Seamen's Church Institute (SCI) urged the maritime industry and governments to devote attention to the seafarers who were being attacked and held hostage by Somali pirates by, among other things, creating a piracy survivors resource center where seafarers, their families, ship-owners, and seafarers' assistance organizations find help for dealing with the effects of piracy on seafarers and their families; study the psychological effects of piracy on seafarers; and create guidelines on caring for



seafarers and their families affected by piracy. At that time, almost all attention was being devoted to stopping piracy that was threatening UN World Food Program shipments to Africa. Of the five UN Security Council Resolutions adopted in 2008, none cited protecting seafarers as a reason for combating piracy off the coast of Somalia. Ironically, the greatest threat to maritime security then and now was the challenge of recruiting and retaining enough skilled people to operate the ships needed to sustain commerce, and piracy was having a negative effect on recruiting and retaining seafarers.

The SCI took up a part of its challenge by initiating in 2009, a clinical study of the mental health effects of piracy on seafarers. It is the first study of its kind in the maritime industry. This clinical study seeks to identify unique stressors of transiting high-risk areas, piracy attacks, hostage situations, along with immediate and ongoing medical evaluation strategies for crew members and their families. Study outcomes include plans for clinically assessing seafarers after piracy incidents, assisting families during prolonged piracy episodes, and triaging short- and long-term mental health treatment. SCI's team of clinical psychologists and medical doctors has completed the data collection phase of the study that included interviewing seafarers representing the diverse nationalities and cultures of maritime commerce. Scientists are now analyzing the data, and the results of the study will be presented at a conference in Cape Town, South Africa this July 2012.

A preliminary product of the clinical study is SCI's *Guidelines: Post-Piracy Care for Seafarers*², a document that explores issues surrounding mental health care for seafarers affected by piracy. Now in its third version, the guidelines have been circulated to the maritime industry, international organizations, governments and nongovernmental organizations. The guidelines contain an appendix listing common symptoms experienced by persons who have experience a traumatic event. Seafarers, their families and ship-mates can use the list to assess the advisability of seeking therapy should the symptoms become problematic in terms of magnitude or duration.

In 2011, International Maritime Organization's declared its theme for the year and for maritime day as: "Piracy – Orchestrating the Response." This, along with initiatives of Working Group 3 of the Contact Group on Piracy Off the Coast of Somalia (CGPCS), spawned broad maritime



industry attention to piracy's impact on seafarers. The Save our Seafarers campaign, initiated in March 2011, is a coalition of more than thirty maritime organizations that have joined together to raise public and governmental awareness of the human and economic costs of piracy. The campaign is calling on governments to take a firmer stance to put an end to seafarers being tortured and murdered by pirates.³ The Maritime Piracy - Humanitarian Response Program (MPHRP), initiated by the International Transport Workers' Federation in September, 2011, has brought together a wide cross-section of the maritime industry, including ship owners, managers, insurers, and welfare organizations with the singular focus of assisting seafarers and their families who have suffered from the effects of piracy. Among other projects, the MPHRP is preparing good practice guidelines for shipping companies, first responders and seafarer welfare organizations.⁴

In an effort to draw attention to the toll that piracy takes on seafarers and their families, the Seafarers' Church Institute has videotaped seafarers' first-hand accounts of their experiences with piracy and posted them on the internet. The seafarers relate stories of mental and physical torture, intimidation of both them and their families and drug abuse by pirates while on board. The videotaped interviews provide seafarers with a platform for sharing in and contributing to the dialogue on post-piracy care.⁵

Much progress has been made towards eradicating the scourge of piracy and several programs have been initiated to provide care for the seafarers and their families who have been affected by piracy. However, there remains great challenges in identifying seafarers who have been affected by piracy and to providing them with care and services, particularly in paying wages earned during captivity, compensating them for their stolen personal property, and according them appropriate medical care.

I am aware of several cases where seafarers, long after being released from captivity by pirates, have not been paid their earned wages or compensated for their personal property that was stolen by pirates. In cases where ship operators fail to meet their obligations to seafarers, there should be a mechanism available to seafarers to recover unpaid wages earned while they were being held hostage by pirates and to compensate them for their stolen property.

A more pressing and difficult challenge is overcoming the stigma of mental health care that deters seafarers from taking advantage of effective therapy. Ship operators are responsible for providing medical care to their seafarers and must ensure affected seafarers receive appropriate medical care and



therapy if they need it. Equally critical, employers must not view seafarers as “damaged goods” after a piracy incident. Most seafarers like most people, are resilient and can continue their careers with few or no adverse effects. Some seafarers experience symptoms that commonly follow post-traumatic events. Extremely effective therapies are available to treat such symptoms. Confronting the stigma of mental health care that deters many seafarers from taking advantage of effective therapy remains our biggest challenge. Programs designed to provide mental health therapy for seafarers offer little benefit if seafarers do not take advantage of them because they fear losing their jobs or not being rehired.

Every nation depends on merchant shipping for its prosperity and every nation has an interest in protecting the safe and efficient flow of commerce by sea. Because the well-being of all the world’s citizens relies on shipping, protecting the safe and efficient flow of commerce by sea must be a top priority. Everyone benefits from shipping; therefore everyone must share in the responsibility for countering threats to shipping.

The biggest threat to shipping today is the worldwide crisis of recruiting sufficient numbers of skilled and responsible men and women to operate all of the ships that are required to sustain maritime commerce. All of us – governments, non-governmental organizations, commercial interests and consumers – must work together to make sea-going careers more attractive options for skilled and responsible men and women.

Unfortunately, the threat of piracy and how seafarers are treated after suffering the effects of piracy create extremely negative perceptions about seagoing careers that make them unattractive to many men and women. Therefore it is in everyone’s best interests to ensure that seafarers are justly compensated for their losses caused by piracy and that they are provided effective therapy for symptoms caused by piracy without fear of losing their livelihoods. It is also the right thing to do.

This article was commissioned by the Institute for Near East and Gulf Military Analysis (INEGMA) on behalf of the second United Arab Emirates Counter Piracy Conference, ‘A Regional Response to Maritime Piracy: Enhancing Public-Private Partnerships and Strengthening Global Engagement’, organized by the UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs in partnership with global ports operator DP World, held in Dubai in June 2012. The opinions expressed in this paper are the views of the author only, and do not reflect the opinions or positions of the conference organizers. Content may have been edited for formatting purposes.

For more information, see the conference website at www.counterpiracy.ae.



¹ EU NAVFOR “European Union Naval Force (EU NAVFOR) Somalia Operation ATALANTA Pirated vessels updated 28 March 2012,” <http://www.eunavfor.eu/press-2/downloads/>

² The Seamen’s Church Institute of New York and New Jersey, *Guidelines: Post-Piracy Care for Seafarers*. <http://seamenschurch.org/law-advocacy/piracy-trauma-study>

³ SaveOurSeafarers. <http://www.saveourseafarers.com/>

⁴ Maritime Piracy – Humanitarian Response Program (MPHRP), <http://www.mphrp.org/>

⁵ The Seamen's Church Institute of New York and New Jersey. “Seafarer Voices – Piracy on the High Seas,” <http://smschur.ch/seafarervoices>