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Maritime security firm acquires own ships to battle pirates

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Espada Logistics and Security Group has purchased its own fleet of vessels to provide security services for the commercial shipping industry in the Gulf of Aden. Until recently, Espada had been leasing the vessels it was using to guard the merchant ships sailing in the pirate-infested waters off the coasts of Yemen and Somalia. But the increasing demands on the Yemini Coast Guard and Navy made that arrangement more difficult to manage, says Jim Jorrie, president of San Antonio-based Espada.

“We needed our own equipment on our own schedule to handle the growing demands for our services,” Jorrie says. “So we made the decision last year to purchase our own vessels.”

Espada, which is based in San Antonio, currently owns a fleet of five vessels, all about 75-feet in length and outfitted with additional fuel capacity, giving them a roughly 2,200 nautical mile range. Each ship can carry a crew of six to eight people.

“The boats look a lot like the PT-109 that John F. Kennedy made famous,” Jorrie says. “We did a lot of work to get them last year, and now they are in the shop having a lot of technical maintenance done. They should be out of the yard and available in a couple of weeks.”

Jorrie would not say how much his company paid for the ships, other than to note that “they were not cheap.” He did note, however, that they raised funds from the investment community last year to pay for the vessels, including a \$1 million investment from a foreign businessman.

“We operate firmly in the black and have enjoyed strong growth over the past few years,” Jorrie says. The company currently employs about 50 people, most of whom operate overseas. Many of the firm’s employees are former military and ex-Special Forces personnel with anti-piracy and anti-insurgent operations experience.

A growth industry

According to the **International Maritime Bureau**, there were a total of 406 incidents of piracy and armed robbery reported around the world in 2009, with Somalia accounting for more than half of those figures. The International Maritime Bureau (IMB) is a department of the International Chamber of Commerce and is responsible for investigating crimes related to maritime trade and transportation.



The last time piracy figures crossed 400 incidents was in 2003, the IMB report states. This was the third successive year that the number of reported incidents have increased.

Worldwide in 2009, 153 vessels were boarded, 49 vessels were hijacked and 120 vessels fired upon — compared to 46 ships fired upon in 2008. A total of 1,052 crew members were taken hostage. Sixty eight crew members were injured in the various incidents and eight were killed.

“The international navies play a critical role in the prevention of piracy in Somalia and it is vital that they remain,” says IMB’s Director, Capt. Pottengal Mukundan. The problem has also begun to spread to other African nations, Mukundan says. While the 2008 attacks were predominantly focused in the Gulf of Aden, 2009 has witnessed more vessels also being targeted along the east coast of Somalia, he says.

The Gulf of Aden, which extends about 700 miles, connects the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean between Yemen and Somalia.

“2009 has seen a significant shift in the area of attacks off Somalia,” Mukundan says. “While the 2008 attacks were predominantly focused in the Gulf of Aden, 2009 has witnessed more vessels also being targeted along the east coast of Somalia. Since October, increased activity has been observed in the Indian Ocean, with 33 incidents reported, including 13 hijackings.”

Rapid response

Crossing the Gulf of Aden is like driving from San Antonio to El Paso in a car that only goes 10 to 15 m.p.h., Jorrie says. It is a wide expanse and to be effective at countering pirates you have to be able to respond to a distress call within the first 15 minutes.

Jorrie says just having a security ship in sight is enough to deter most would-be pirates who are more interested in looking for an easier target.

“Having an escort vessel allows us to go out and confront the pirates and give them the message that this is not low-hanging fruit,” Jorrie says. “In nearly every case they turn around and go away.”

Jorrie says the threat from pirates will continue to be a problem in that area for years to come because of the extreme poverty there. The average per capita income in those countries is only about \$300 a year, he says. But even the lowliest pirate can typically make \$10,000 and some make much more.

The international community is working to combat this problem, he says, but for now the best course is to take the necessary precautions by having a security escort.