



'Panic button' cuts response time to pirate attacks



London: Shipowners transiting the Indian Ocean and Gulf of Aden are being urged to sign up to a new service which can dramatically cut the time taken by naval forces to respond to an emergency alert.

Developed by marine tracking specialist Pole Star, the Ship Security Reporting System (SSRS) is the result of efforts by MSC-HOA command, leading flag states and marine insurers to give merchant ships the best possible chance of fending off a pirate attack.

SSRS works by immediately alerting naval forces command when a Ship Security Alert System (SSAS) message is sent by a ship under attack. The system became fully operational in the first week of January and its developers say it has the potential to cut the time in which the navies are able to respond to as little as 30 minutes. The first half an hour after pirates are sighted has been shown to be vital in being able to defend the ship and stop an attack becoming a hijack.

The SSAS system, mandatory under the International Ship and Port Facility Security (ISPS) Code sends an alert to the flag and the company security officer. In practice, it can take hours before navies are informed and a response mounted. SSRS works by copying the existing SSAS message to the MSC-HOA command centre with ship data, IMO number, speed and course. The military can then assign the closest naval asset to emergency response.

The system is being backed by some of the world's biggest flag states. The Marshall Islands has already recommended the system to its clients and Liberia, Singapore and several Middle Eastern states are known to be evaluating it. Marine insurers have also signalled their support, Hiscox is offering one year's subscription when shipowners buy kidnap and ransom policies.

SSRS costs \$500 per ship per year and requires only minor re-configuration of SSAS software. Owners applying are background-checked and can enter their own fleet details to the system.

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