

Automatic distress call aims to foil pirates

UK satellite company Polestar develops reporting system that could speed up military response to attacks in the Gulf of Aden

Craig Eason

VESSELS under attack in the Gulf of Aden are being offered the capability of sending an automated emergency message direct to naval forces in the area.

As attacks become more sophisticated there is a call for shipowners to put stronger measures in place to reduce the risk of pirates successfully boarding vessels.

The ship security reporting system has been developed by UK-based satellite communication company Polestar. It uses the ship security alert system that all merchant vessels have onboard with the simple addition that the emergency message is copied direct to the relevant naval presence.

The proposal is that this service will speed up military responses to attacks in waters that are being patrolled by naval vessels, which will in turn reduces the risk of a successful pirate attack.

A number of flag administrations, including the Marshall Islands and Liberia, have already issued marine advisories recommending owners with vessels under their flag to subscribe to the system.

"EU Navfor came to us about getting the information on the merchant fleets that go through the region. They wanted to find a way of speeding up the process of getting the alert information to them," said Polestar chief executive David Plumer.

The ship operator or owner has a responsibility to make sure an SSAS is installed on a ship, in accordance with the Solas convention. When activated it can send a ship to shore security alert which



Patrolling the Gulf of Aden: an automated transmission sends a threatened ship's IMO number, position and time of message.

consists of the vessel's International Maritime Organization number and position, as well as the time of the transmission.



On guard: EU Navfor wanted to speed up the process of receiving alerts.

The signal is sent to the flag administration but does not raise an alarm on board the vessel. It can be activated from the bridge of the vessel and one other location onboard.

Vessels either have a standalone SSAS that sends the signal directly to the flag administration, or a more complex system provided by suppliers such as Transas or Polestar, which transmits the alert via the system provider and adds additional information. These systems can also allow remote polling of the onboard hardware, giving the ship operator the chance to get a better picture of what is happening on the vessel.

When approached by EU Navfor, Polestar recommended it to use the SSAS transmission. If an officer on a bridge of a ship activates the SSAS, a copy of the signal is routed directly to the naval command in the region for immediate action. All the

shipowner had to do was ensure the SSAS hardware had the address of the relevant military command added, Mr Plumer said.

"We simply add a cc: to the email that is sent, marry it with the static data and send it to whichever military force has responsibility for operations in that area," he said. "EU Navfor thought this was a great idea."

Eventually, SSRS will be sent to other military areas as they come into operation, such as the new one further out in the Gulf of Aden and even the Malacca Straits and possibly in West Africa, where task forces could be set up.

A copy of the SSRS is sent to the shipowner's shore-based security officer to ensure the owner is also aware of what is happening and what details have been sent to the relevant taskforce.

Polestar sells the service at \$500 per vessel per year.