

Pole Star develops vessel tracking and alert system

PROVIDING rapid alerts to naval anti-piracy forces is an effective way of preventing and resisting pirate attacks to that they can respond as quickly as possible.

But transmitting such alerts in time is a big challenge especially in remote regions where anti-piracy patrols are thinly spread over large sea areas, such as in the Indian Ocean.

An alert system operated using Inmarsat is widely used, but was mainly aimed at responding to terrorist attacks rather than piracy.

A new Ship Tracking and Security Alert System has been developed specifically aimed at providing a rapid piracy alert to naval forces allowing them to respond promptly. It provides a direct link to EU Navfor organisations and flag administrations.

UK-based Pole Star, which operates the system, told LLSM that the increase in piracy prompted demand for closer monitoring and tracking of vessels in high risk areas. Pole Star was already involved in commercial tracking of ships and fleet management and expanded to providing Long Range Identification and Tracking.

Pole Star's existing systems provide tracking for about 13,600 ships using its Fleet Management and Tracking system, SSAS and vessel monitoring, as well as LRIT data centres for 38 flag administrations that will track 9,000 ships by the end of this year, bringing to total number of vessels being monitored to about 24,000.

Pole Star's Julie Lithgow said that in response the company developed its Ship Security Reporting System, which sends an instant alert to Navfor. The company claims the alert will be received by naval headquarters within five minutes of transmission from the ship. "But in practice the maximum time is one minute and often as little as 15 seconds," she told LLSM.

"Today's Somali pirates are different from those operating in the Strait of Malacca or Nigerian pirates. The speed of response is vital. If naval forces can react quickly the pirates will switch to another target. There is no faster response, but we still recommend owners follow other guidelines to minimise the risks of successful pirate attacks."

Since the SSRS system was introduced there has so far been no successful pirate attack on any vessels fitted with it, according to Pole Star.

Ms Lithgow said that in the six months to August there were fewer than 10 real alerts, although there were also a few false, accidental alerts.

The SSRS system currently operates in the Gulf of Aden but it is being expanded to areas off East and West Africa, where piracy risks are high. Other developments include new interfaces with naval forces.

About 500 ships are registered and vessels subscribe for one year. The annual subscription fee is \$500, although it is possible for a cheaper, short-term subscription if ships are only transiting a high-risk area on a one-off basis.

Several flag states have issued advisories recommending ships under their flag subscribe to the SSRS system. They include Hong Kong, Marshall Islands and Liberia. ■

"The speed of response is vital. If naval forces can react quickly the pirates will switch to another target"

*Julie Lithgow,
Pole Star*

A pirate speedboat approaching a tanker; in the event of a piracy attack, Pole Star's SSRS system sends an instant alert to Navfor, which it claims will be received by naval headquarters within five minutes of transmission.

