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Back on dry land, a country is drowning

Foreign navies are not likely to be able to completely eradicate pirate attacks off the coast of Somalia -- such as the audacious capture of a Saudi supertanker -- making it even more important for the world to stabilize a country that has experienced 17 years of conflict.

The piracy industry started to take off roughly 15 years ago when, shortly after the collapse of the central government, the tuna-rich coastal waters within Somalia's 200-mile exclusive economic zone were plundered by commercial fishing fleets from around the world. The Somali coastline used to sustain hundreds of thousands of people and it has been estimated that Somalia loses \$300 million to illegal fishing every year. It didn't take long before Somali fishermen began to arm themselves in order to capture foreign fishing vessels and demand compensation for the depletion of their fish stocks.

In subsequent years, they became greedy pirates who attacked all ships for ransom. They would not even spare ships that were carrying food aid for their impoverished countrymen. The attraction to piracy as a way of life for many young men comes from their realization that an impoverished, lawless and unstable country such as Somalia provides a perfect environment for an illicit business with low risk and very high rewards.

We now find ourselves in a situation where there have been nearly 100 attacks this year resulting in dozens of successful hijackings. Commercial ships are increasingly avoiding the use of the Suez Canal due to its proximity to the pirate-infested waters of the Gulf of Aden. Sailing the longer route around Africa will inevitably raise transportation costs and the price of oil and manufactured goods to Europe and North America.

The international community's approach has been to view this as a problem that requires a military solution. International navy patrols in the Gulf of Aden have resulted in a reduction of successful hijackings to 31 per cent in October, down from

53 per cent in August. But the capture of the Saudi supertanker shows that the pirates have honed their nautical skills and have obtained new equipment that enables them to threaten vessels along the whole eastern and southern African seaboard. In addition to the difficulty of effectively patrolling a very large area, foreign navies are often unable to militarily engage a hijacked ship due to the presence of hostages.

There are also legal issues that need to be ironed out. For example, who would be held responsible if a member of a private security firm hired to protect a merchant ship killed a Somali pirate? The difficulty of identifying hostile ships was clearly seen last week, when the Indian frigate Tabar destroyed what it thought was a pirate ship. It turned out that the suspect vessel was a Thai fishing boat that was being taken over by pirates when the frigate approached it. Thailand subsequently lodged a protest to India for its action.

The main cause of piracy is the instability inside Somalia where there is a lack of law and order and accountability. Federal and regional governments lack the capacity to take on pirates that are heavily armed. The latest acts of piracy are a reflection of the dire state of affairs in a country where more than three million people are dependent on food aid. Somalis are greatly disappointed to witness the speed with which the international community came together to tackle the piracy problem while dragging its feet when it comes to providing meaningful support for Somalia.

It is not too late for the world to assist the Somali people in their effort to achieve lasting peace and reconciliation. There is hope that a deal signed on Wednesday in Djibouti to share power between the country's transitional federal government and an Islamist-led opposition faction will pave the way toward ending years of violence in Somalia. An expanded parliament is to appoint a new speaker and hold new elections in January to elect an interim president. The unity transitional government has also been given two more years to consolidate power and stabilize the country. The international community needs to put serious weight behind this process in order to ensure that Somalia is able stand on its feet and become a truly functional state. That may be the key to eliminating the causes and opportunities for piracy.

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