



## Special Report: Hijacking of MV ABDULLAH by Somali pirates-did the crew and ship have to be hijacked??



On April 14, 2024, after 32 days in captivity with Somali pirates, the crew of the MV ABDULLAH was freed after paying a ransom worth 5 million. The release of the crew is a good time to share reflections on this hijacking and to reflect on whether this pirate attack had to end with the capture of the vessel and taking the sailors hostage.

Somali pirates have used dhows and fishing boats as motherships in the Indian Ocean since January 2024 to search for new targets: the FV ANDALUS and an unknown dhow hijacked on January 13, 2024, the FV Al JABAR on January 18, 2024, and the FV AL MECCA and FV Al MAKKAH hijacked on January 28, 2024, as well as another fishing boat FV UNK hijacked just 10 days before the attack on MV ABDULLAH

Their search was successful and resulted in the hijacking of the Bangladesh-flagged vessel MV ABDULLAH on March 12, 2024. The ship was carrying coal from Mozambique to the United Arab Emirates and was attacked by Somali pirates in the Indian Ocean about 575 Nautical Miles east of Mogadishu.

There were 23 Bangladeshi seamen who were taken hostage on the side of a ship belonging to Bangladeshi shipowner SR Shipping of KSRM Group.

Videos of the pirate attack on the MV ABDULLAH ship are to be found in the media.





On the video from the attack, which appeared on social media and a YouTube channel <https://youtu.be/ly4KYwGp6vU>>

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a very interesting situation is depicted: when the fishing vessel used by the pirates as a "mother ship" is very close to the port side of the MV ABDULLAH, sailing on a parallel course at almost the same speed as the ship.

At the same time, a Somali-type boarding skiff can be seen - making an attack and boarding the starboard side of the MV ABDULLAH. The Pirate Strike Group (PSG) at this time consisted of two vessels: the "mother ship" - a fishing vessel and a Somali-type skiff. In 2008/2012, the PGA usually consisted of a "dhow" type fishing vessel and two "skiffs."





The analysis of the above video is intriguing and even ideal for training purposes and will probably be used by Maritime Safety & Security when training sailors to sail in the High Risk Areas (HRA).

The footage shows that the MV Abdullah ship does not use passive defense and none of the recommended actions of the basic layer of defense according to Best Management Practice 5 (BMP 5) for Horn of Africa were applied by the crew. (Best Management Practices to Deter Piracy and Enhance Maritime Security in the Red Sea, Gulf of Aden, Indian Ocean and Arabian Sea). No physical barriers, no razor wire can be seen on the side of the ship, and no fire system equipment on board the ship was used, which could hinder the boarding. Interestingly, the behavior of several members of the ship's crew can also be seen. Even though the crew is excited about the attack their behavior is characterized by passivity towards the pirates' actions.

There is also no indication of increasing the ship's speed during the attack (recommended by mentioned BMP 5).





From an analysis of the information from open sources, it appears that the hijacking of the ship occurred at 11 knots, which also seems to be confirmed by the recording. The recording does not show the ship performing the "ZIG-ZAC" maneuver recommended in the abovementioned situation. No other actions were taken by the crew to impede the boarding which would have made the action more difficult and prolonged.

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Further in the video you can see the first pirate entering the starboard side. The person who enters the side of the attacked ship first and performs the boarding, called by the author the "Catcher," is very important in the composition of a pirate boarding party.



The task of the "Catcher" is to hook the ladder to the side of the ship, climb aboard the ship as quickly as possible and allow the other pirates to do so. The role of the "Catcher" is not only crucial and difficult, but also dangerous. He is the one who is primarily exposed to a possible attack after boarding or to wounds and cuts associated with overcoming the razor wire deployed on the side. Fortunately for this one, such a razor wire barrier on the MV ABDULLAH was not used. Previous experience says, that there is no problem finding among the pirates the one who would undertake the role of "Catcher." In years 2008/12, this risk was rewarded for the "Catcher" with an additional payment of \$5,000 when the ransom was split.





Somali pirates when boarding a vessel use a ladder as a primary boarding equipment. The ladder is adapted for this purpose. Adapting the ladder for boarding operations involves ending it with hooks or angles that allow it to be hooked directly over the side of the vessel.

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We need to pay attention to fact, that the MV ABDULLAH attack videos appearing on social media are "cut" and edited in various ways.

An in-depth analysis of open sources has found yet another (longer) video of the attack on the MV ABDULLAH, which appears not to have been abridged and may represent the full version of the pirates' record of the attack on the ship without tampering with the footage. The footage was posted on the Bangladesh channel of the Suport 24 news service. This time the video has been "woven" into the content of a longer report on the hijacking of the MV ABDULLAH.

<https://youtu.be/vK4Z7KRHu2w>

The video of the incident (most likely without tampering with the footage) shows one sailor standing on the bridge wing on the starboard side and filming the pirates' attack on the ship with his cell phone. The sailor records the pirate's climb up the ladder on the starboard side of the ship. It looks like the "Cather" is going relatively smoothly. Due to the relatively low speed of the ship - 11 knots, the lack of physical barriers and the non-use of the "ZIG-ZAC" maneuver.





What's more - in addition to the sailor filming the pirate's ascent - another two MV Abdullah crew members can be seen on the bridge wing, also excitedly watching the pirate climb the ladder to the side, and absurdly one of them aiming at him with a brush stick. Probably hoping it might scare him away. Page | 6





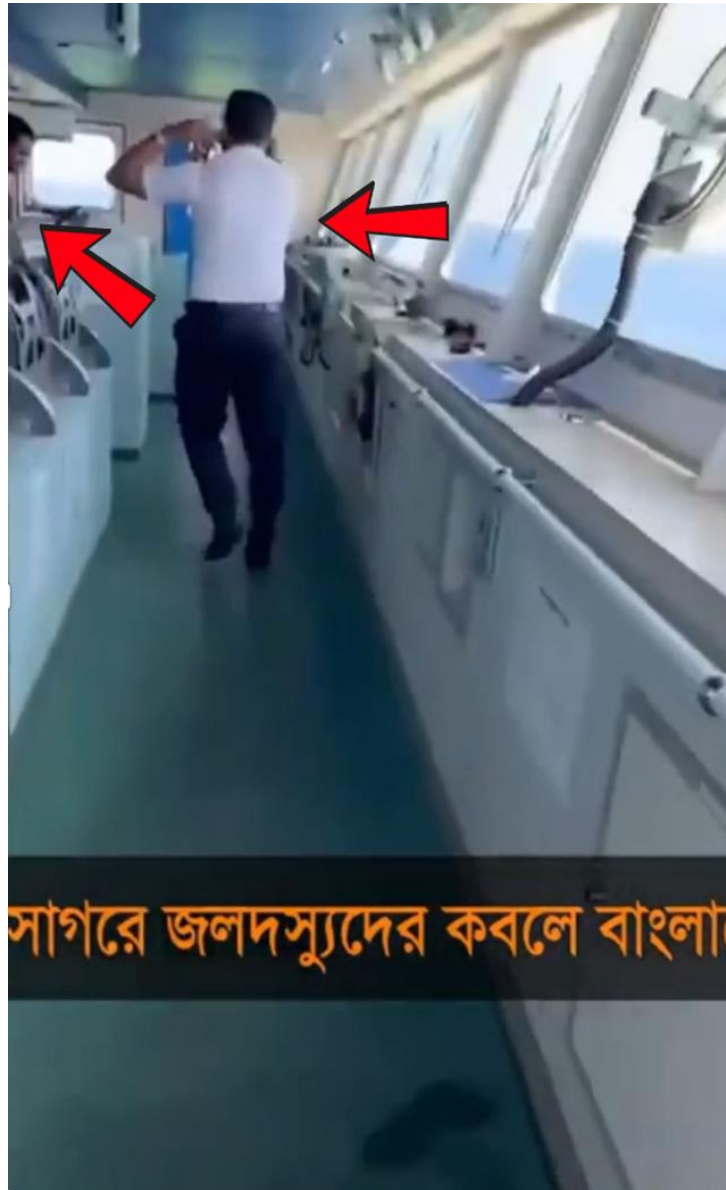
Another video of the attack on the MV ABDULLAH can be found on the **You Tube** channel, where it can be seen that in addition to these three men, there were two other sailors on the bridge wing at the same time of the attack.



An analysis of the video up to this point allows us to conclude that a total of five people were on the bridge wing at the time of the attack: one recording the attack with a cell phone, another aiming a brush stick at the attackers (hoping it might scare them away) and three other sailors accompanying them. All of them are doing completely irrelevant things, not to improve the safety of the ship or crew, instead of following the ship's procedures - hiding in the "Citadel".

The next frame of the video shows the interior of the bridge, with a fast-moving man in uniform talking on the phone (most likely the captain), and another person at the helm. This means that on the bridge at the time of the attack and the pirates climbing overboard there were a minimum of seven people. It does not appear from the behavior of the sailors that they were heading to hide from the pirates in the citadel.





This behavior can be considered very imprudent and inappropriate to the situation, like the failure to prepare physical barriers or take steps to make it difficult for the pirates to attack.

The next frame of the video shows another two men on board. They could be pirates, although just as likely they could be crew members watching the pirates coming in over the side of the ship.

**A holistic analysis of the incident based on content from the video indicates that the crew was unprepared for the pirate attack and did not follow any rule from BMP5.**







It should be stressed that the application of BMP 5's recommendations, the placement of barbed wire, utilization of anti-fire hoses, the use of ZIG ZAG maneuvers, and the crew's confinement to the Citadel most likely could have protected the crew from abduction. That's what the citadel was created for, so that the crew, once the pirates boarded, could wait safely in hiding for help.

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If properly implemented, situation might have evolved to situation similar to MV LILA NORFOLK, which was attacked by pirates on January 4, 2024.

The vessel, after being boarded by pirates and after correct action from the crew – lock themselves in a citadel, was rescued by the Indian Navy. The Indians, after receiving a distress call, sent a P-8I patrol aircraft to the area of the ship's whereabouts, while a missile destroyer INS CHENNAI approached from the sea

The presence of the Indian Navy, but also conveying a warning to the pirates, the pirates escaped from the side of the ship on the night of January 4-5 even before the Marcos commandos arrived. The commandos searched the ship after the boarding and freed the crew hidden in the citadel. The ship's crew hid in the citadel at the time of the attack, using a procedure that had been known for years and prepared in advance. The 21-person crew stayed safely hidden in the Citadel, and the pirates were unable to abduct the crew despite boarding and capturing the ship.

### **Why didn't the sailors from the MV ABDULLAH take shelter in the Citadel during the attack?**

All indications are that the crew of the MV ABDULLAH did not take shelter in the Citadel not only during the attack, but even after the pirates boarded the vessel. What was a reason for this – it's difficult to say. Bangladesh media reported information from family members of the MV ABDULLAH sailors that they contacted their loved ones during the attack notifying them that they had been attacked by pirates.





<https://www.tbsnews.net/bangladesh/they-will-kill-us-one-one-if-ransom-not-paid-chief-officer-ship-under-pirate-attack>

Later on, onboard MV ABDULLAH, there was also a strange situation, when the pirates, after boarding and just before taking the crew's phones, ordered them to contact their families and handed over a demand for a \$5 million ransom. Declaring that they would kill the sailors if the ransom was not paid.

This was a peculiar case, since the negotiation process begins when the pirates reach a safe waiting place after the hijacking to pay the ransom. The location usually depends on which clan the pirates attacking the ship are from. Once on board the ship, radio silence is ordered, and all communication devices are turned off. Communication with the shipowner is also cut off. It will be re-established only after the ship arrives at a pirate-safe location, where the ship will await payment of the ransom. At this stage, the crew is also always robbed of valuables. Upon reaching the waiting area, other pirates enter the ship's deck, reinforcing the ship's security, and protection is launched by a group securing the hijacked ship from the land side. In both groups, juveniles and women can also perform security tasks.

In some cases, there have been as many as 35 pirates onboard of a hijacked ship waiting to pay a ransom at anchor. Heavier weaponry such as machine guns are also used to protect the vessel. The same was the case with the MV ABDULLAH - on the social media of people associated with Putland, photos of a DShK 12.7mm machine gun that was supposed to be placed onboard MV ABDULLAH when vessel was held at anchor about 4 Mm off the coast of Godobjiraan in northeastern Somalia near Dhinawda appeared.





Protection is implemented not only to repel a possible attempt to free the hostages, but also as a safeguard against an attack by a rival pirate group.

Passing the pirates' demands through the families before contacting the shipowner SR SHIPPING, which was only 2 weeks after the incident, was not a standard action by the pirates. They may also have been taken by surprise by the fact that they were able to take the crew as hostages from the side of the ship without defeating the citadel, and further acted uncharacteristically by communicating the ransom demands through the families, and not as it used to be that the negotiator contacted the shipowner first. Perhaps this is becoming the new modus operandi of Somali pirates. Possibly the action of ordering the crew to contact the families and the media is to ensure media coverage of the hijacking (which the shipowner may not be at all interested in), and thus may result in speed up negotiations through outside pressure on the shipowner.

Usually the first contact with the shipowner takes place about a week after the hijacking. This was also the case with another ship of the same shipowner hijacked by Somali pirates in 2010 and held with its crew for 100 days - MV JAHAN MONI. Average data show, that in 2009, ship crews hijacked by Somali pirates were detained for 44 days.

As the contrary, in 2010, the average length of time crews were held captive from abduction to release after payment of a ransom was 106 days.

The effectiveness of Citadel's use was first noticed back on February 5, 2010, when Somali pirates attacked the MV ARIELLA. The ship was moving in convoy in the recommended IRTC (International Recommended Transit Corridor). After the attack, the 25-member crew disappeared hiding from the pirates into a safe room.



After receiving a signal from the ship's captain that the pirates were on board and the crew was safe, the Atalanta mission command gave the order for the Danish ship ABSALON to go into action and to send a boarding party consisting of Danish special unit operators aboard the MV ARIELLA. When the commandos arrived aboard the ship, it turned out that the pirates had escaped

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The second example of citadel use was in May 2010, when the UKMTO (The UK Maritime Trade Operations) received information that pirates had boarded the Russian tanker MV UNIVERSITY OF MOSCOW. As in the case of the MV ARIELLE, the pirates failed to capture members of the crew, who hid in the citadel. The captain contacted the Russian destroyer MARSHAL SHAPASHNIKOV, which was operating in the area. Being confident that the crew was safe, the Russian government decided to recapture the ship. After the Russian commandos arrived on board, the surprised pirates resisted and an exchange of fire ensued. Because of the shootout, one of the pirates was killed and the remaining 10 surrendered to the Russian commandos. The effectiveness of the crew's use of the Citadel was confirmed by the fact that none of the 23-man crew was even injured.

At the time of discovering the citadel's effectiveness in 2010, there were also a few failures as in the case of MV EMS RIVER, MV LEOPARD, and MV BELUGA NOMINATION.

Since then, citadels have been used as a primary measure to reduce the risk of crew abduction in the event of a pirate attack by hundreds, perhaps even thousands of times. Unfortunately, it must be said, not always successfully. Pirates, and both those from the Horn of Africa in 2008-2012 and the and from the Gulf of Guinea were able to deal with the citadel using equipment found on the ship: torches, crowbars, chain hoists or simply bringing their gas torches to cut steel.

However, this does not change the fact that in the event of a pirate attack, the escape of the crew to the citadel remains the priority action to hinder the abduction of the crew.

It is difficult to say conclusively whether following the recommendations of BMP 5 would have saved the crew of the MV ABDULLAH, but failing to take shelter in it was a very serious mistake.

The activity and high effectiveness of the Indian Navy in that area engaged in protecting shipping and combating piracy and assisting ships attacked by the Huti in the event of the crew's confinement in the citadel could augur a solution to this situation like that known from the

MV LILA NORFOLK.



The Indian Navy, fighting piracy in the region since November 2023, has recaptured from the hands of pirates the crews and ships MV RUEN, FV AL KAMBAR 786, FV OMARI, as well as provided assistance to Huti attacked MV CHEM PLUTO, MV MARLIN LUANDA, MV ISLANDER, MV MSC SKY II, MV GENCO PICARDY, MV TRUE CONFIDENCE, MV LILA NORFOLK.

Helping the crew of the MV ABDULLAH, hidden in the citadel, would have posed no problem and was part of standard operations. In a similar manner, assistance was provided to the crew and the arrest of Somali pirates who on November 26, 2023, attacked the ship MV CENTRAL PARK in the Gulf of Aden.

The pirates boarded the ship, and the crew hid in the citadel calling for help. The U.S. ship USS MASON (DDG 87) and units from the Coalition Task Force to Combat Piracy (TF 151) responded to the call for help by going to the aid of the crew. The pirates, after the aircraft appeared and called for them to abandon ship just before the arrival of the US ship, left the deck of the MV CENTRAL PARK. The Navy ship then stopped a group of 5 pirates fleeing from the ship in a small boat towards the Somali coast.





At this point, when considering the use of the citadel in situations of attack on the ship, it is worth noting that due to attacks by UAV unidirectional drones, as well as ballistic missiles and cruise missiles, its current location in the steering gear (as is most often the case) is not safe for the ship's crew members residing there in the event of being hit by means of aerial attack.

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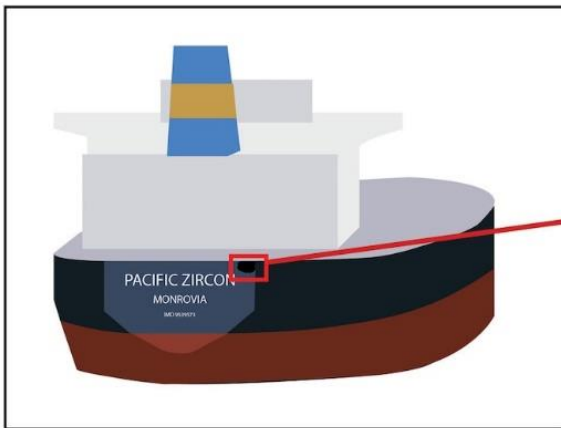


The experience taken from UAV (Unmanned Aerial Vehicle) drone attacks and SHAHED 131 cruise munitions on the MV MERCER STREET where a British man in command of the ship's armed security team was killed after a drone hit the tenting deck makes one realize how shrapnel was able to pass through 3 or 4 layers of sheet metal dividing the ship's compartments.

This is also confirmed by the damage to the second vessel, attacked with SHAHED 136 drone - MV PACIFIC ZIRCON, which was hit in the transom near the deck.

In this case, the steering gear compartment would be a dangerous place for the crew to hide.





Initial point of impact of the Shahed-136 unmanned aerial vehicle on the M/T Pacific Zircon.

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Recent events related to Huti attacks on ships show that new threats should direct shipowners and ships crew itself to be properly prepared and trained not only for encounters with pirates, but also on how to deal with terrorist attacks using drones: UAV, USV (Unmanned Surface Vehicle) and UUV (Unmanned Underwater Vehicle). What's more, crews must also be prepared for situations involving the handling of a long-term hostage incident and the recapture of a ship by special forces.

The author and Maritime Safety & Security have been training seafarers in this area for more than 15 years, ranging from preparing the ship for navigation in the HRA, post-attack or safe operation during prolonged isolation, as well as handling the ship's rebound.

Experience shows that most often shipowners prepare their crews for an attack situation and in terms of preparing the ship to navigate in a threatened area by teaching the procedure of hiding the crew in a citadel. Completely forgetting the fact that this action may also prove to be ineffective. Failing to prepare seafarers for a situation of prolonged isolation as a result of being hijacked by pirates.





Not to mention teaching how to behave in the event of a possible special forces action recapturing the ship. Selectively preparing ship crews for only one stage of a complex pirate attack, which consists of several elements that, depending on the success of the attack, also include hijacking and a long-term hostage incident is not proper preparation of personnel for shipping in the HRA. As is the training of crews by internal forces without the help of specialized external companies specializing in maritime security training. In the case of in-house training by the shipowner's security services, the lack of a thorough analysis and current situation in areas with high risk of pirate attacks, which is continuously performed by specialized maritime security companies such as Maritime Safety & Security, that analyze and monitor asymmetric threats at sea. Frankly speaking, in-house training does not give sailors the opportunity to obtain the necessary reliable knowledge of the modus operandi of pirates.

The situation with the MV ABDULLAH shows that proper training and preparation of the crew for a pirate attack could most likely save the seafarers from staying in isolation for 32 days and the shipowner from paying a \$5 million ransom.

There is also a danger that if the crews of ships sailing in the HRA are not properly prepared for pirate attacks, and if their hijacking is as simple as the hijacking of the MV ABDULLAH this will encourage pirates to continue their activities and contribute to an increase in their activity in that area.

The MV ABDULLAH was the second ship after the MV RUEN to be hijacked in the Horn of Africa region after many years of relative calm and lack of pirate activity in the area.

Attacks by pirates who, since late November 2023, in addition to the hijacked vessels MV RUEN and MV ABDULLAH, attacks on MV CENTRAL PARK, MV LILA NORFOLK, MV NEW LEONIDAS, MV YAMILAH III, have also hijacked more than 19 smaller "dhow" vessels and fishing vessels, seven of which are still being held show that piracy in the Horn of Africa region is significantly recovering.







In a new twist on piracy in the Horn of Africa, previously estimated to have flourished in 2008/2012 today, pirates are leading 1:0. What's more, the \$5 million won from the ransom will now be invested in their continued operations and the development of groups capable of carrying out attacks on ships.



Experience with another threat in that area of Huthi attacks on ships in the Red Sea, the Bab El Mandeb Strait, the Arabian Sea and the Gulf of Aden shows that current asymmetric threats to ships and shipping are at the highest level in the history of shipping.

Iranian-backed Huthi militants have used ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, drones in 74 incidents and attacks targeting ships since November 2023: UAVs, USVs and UUVs, and WBIED (Water Borne Improvised Explosive Devices) payloads.

In the past four months, two ships: MV GALAXY LEADER and MV MSC ARIES were hijacked by Houthi commandos and soldiers of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) forces (even using helicopters), the MV RUBYMAR was sunk, and an aerial attack killed three crew members of the MV TRUE CONFIDENCE.

This threat development shows that crews in immediate need of training to teach them how to adequately prepare their ships to navigate in a threatened area, as well as how to behave to minimize risks and losses in the event of such asymmetric attacks. Shipowners and those in charge of security should be fully aware that the requirements in this regard under the ISPS Code (International Ship and Port Facility Security Code) aimed at enhancing the security of shipping against terrorism are hardly relevant to today's threats.





It should be recalled that the ISPS Code was established in 2004, following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

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Today's threats and the means of warfare used by state and non-state actors attacking international shipping are disproportionately more advanced and developed than the historical threats of Al Qaeda and the means then available to Islamic terrorists.



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