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WARNING: TOPIC: CRIME, MILITARY, URGENT

SERIAL: AFP20090415509002

/***** THIS IS A COMBINED MESSAGE *****/

BODY

COUNTRY: SOMALIA, UNITED STATES, KENYA

INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATION: UN

SUBJ: US SHIP ESCAPES WITH MINOR DAMAGE AFTER SOMALI PIRATES
ATTACK IT WITH ROCKETS (U)SOURCE: PARIS AFP (WORLD SERVICE) IN ENGLISH 1259 GMT 15 APR 09
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News Agencies

OSC Transcribed Text

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MOGADISHU, April 15, 2009 (AFP) - Somali pirates attacked an American freighter with rockets to "destroy" the ship in revenge for an operation that freed a US captain last weekend, one of their commanders said Wednesday.

The freighter escaped the attack late Tuesday, but more vessels have fallen into the hands of marauding Somali bandits.

"This attack was the first against our prime target," pirate commander Abdi Garad told AFP of the attack on the Liberty Sun late Tuesday. "We intended to destroy this American-flagged ship and the crew on board but unfortunately they narrowly escaped us.

"The aim of this attack was totally different. We were not after a ransom. We also assigned a team with special equipment to chase and destroy any ship flying the American flag in retaliation for the brutal killing of our friends."

Pirates have taken four ships since losing two battles with US and French forces at the weekend.

Their latest target was the Liberty Sun which was heading for the Kenyan port of Mombasa with international food aid, the owners said.

The USS Bainbridge, which mounted the operation to rescue the captain of US cargo Maersk Alabama, came to the rescue of the Liberty Sun, officials said.

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Crew members gave a dramatic account of the attack.

"We are under attack by pirates, we are being hit by rockets.

Also bullets," crewman Thomas Urbik told his mother in email messages, CNN television reported.

"We are barricaded in the engine room and so far no one is hurt. (A) rocket penetrated the bulkhead but the hole is small. Small fire, too, but put out."

Urbik said the US Navy escorted the ship to safety. "The navy has showed up we are now under military escort," he wrote.

Garad said the attack was revenge for the weekend operation that freed Maersk Alabama captain Richard Phillips and killed three pirates.

Phillips was taken hostage on a lifeboat after his crew managed to overpower pirates who had hijacked the ship.

He was freed in a spectacular Navy Seals operation Sunday which prompted US President Barack Obama to pledge tough action in the fight against piracy.

But pirates were swift to brush off their weekend losses and have attacked four more ships since.

The MV Irene, a 35,000-tonne Greek-operated ship, was hijacked in the Gulf of Aden. Its 22 Filipino crew are believed to be safe.

The NATO naval mission in the area said another ship was seized but its identity remained unclear.

At least 18 ships and close to 300 crew are being held by **Somali pirates**. Ten of the ships have been taken this month.

Experts predicted that pirate attacks and hijackings in the Gulf of Aden and Indian Ocean would continue at a similar rate for at least another two weeks on the back of calm sea conditions.

"The pirates have really upped the ante lately and we haven't reached the peak of the calm season yet," said Nick Davis, a maritime security expert who runs a UK-based private company.

According to sources close to the pirates, French ships were also prime targets following the weekend rescue of the Tanit yacht in

/***** BEGINNING OF SECTION 2 *****/

which a hostage and two pirates were killed.

Three **Somali pirates** arrested during the French military rescue operation were taken to France on Tuesday and put in custody.

French commandos had already launched rescue operations in two previous cases over the past year, killing and capturing pirates.

In a statement, top UN envoy to Somalia, Ahmedou Ould-Abdallah, backed the operations saying they "are sending a strong message to

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the pirates and, more importantly, to their backers who are exploiting the poverty and desperation of their young, unemployed compatriots."

UN International Maritime Bureau (IMB) head Noel Choong said: "We support the robust response against the pirates." But he added that there are risks involved.

So far **Somali pirates** have sought to release ships for ransoms and have not killed any hostages. But their attacks have prompted naval powers to deploy ships to patrol pirate-infested waters.

Somalia has gone through close to two decades of war and lawless chaos which have made piracy one of the few viable businesses.

Description of Source: Paris AFP (World Service) in English -- world news service of the independent French news agency Agence France Presse

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