

Compliance with ISO 28007 will determine the future of the private maritime security industry

The successful Private Maritime Security companies (PMSCs) today and in the future will be those that are agile and large enough to be able to operate in an increasingly complex and regulated arena.

This environment will demand that PMSCs act not only in accordance with individual Flag State regulations but also with internationally recognised and auditable standards such as ISO PAS 28007.

Whilst piracy off the coast of Somalia seems to be at an all time low, the pirate infrastructure in the country is still very much intact. Other regions such as West Africa are also becoming areas of increasing concern.

The next few years will see an increasing focus on the oceans, part of the 'global commons' accounting for 70% of the Earth's surface, where there is little if any effective governance. Navies of the world are diminishing in numbers and those policing the Indian Ocean often refer to the scale of the problem as like policing an area the size of Europe with only half a dozen police cars.

Hurricane Haiyan in the Philippines has inadvertently impacted on the scale of the problem facing the World's navies. Warships like the Royal Navy's HMS DARING, which was recently assigned to Counter Piracy operations, has, quite rightly, been ordered east to render disaster relief and aid. The irony of this will not be wasted on those who understand that the Philippines is home to the vast majority of the crews that man the world's commercial ships.

The reality is that very often, there is no 'police car' available in vast swathes of the 'global commons, meaning that it is time for the shipping industry to start thinking strategically about what needs to be done in the future if vessels, cargo and, more importantly, crews' safety are to be ensured.

The situation off Somalia and in the Indian Ocean Region has indeed quietened down to a degree, but as Somalia expert Mary Harper, BBC Africa Editor has recently commented, "Somali pirates are sleeping. They have not gone away."

Somalia is often described as a failed state. Well, yes it is, but not sufficiently failed that criminality cannot prosper. Piracy, as is the case with any criminality, can only exist when there is some legitimate governance, but not so much of it that the forces of law and order are able to successfully crack down on illicit activity. When a total breakdown of governance occurs even piracy cannot exist in the ensuing chaos and anarchy. The situation in Somalia provides the perfect permissive environment for pirate activity to exist. It is often tolerated, and sometimes participated in, by local clan leaders and war lords who thereby provide the green light to any enterprising pirate band which is lucky enough to capture a vessel. Five years on from the 2008 Gulf of Aden piracy breakout that precipitated international action to restore order to the Indian Ocean, Somalia remains politically fragmented. Sadly, Somali clan leaders seeking to gain dominance over their area have continued to create conditions which remain favourable to pirate activity.

While the International Maritime Bureau (IMB) reported **thirteen** incidents, including two hijackings, in 2013 (reported on November 25th), the Somali Government claimed in September that no hijackings have been reported in the region for more than **fifteen** months. Both reports are true enough and highlight the degree to which the piracy problem in the Indian Ocean is subject to political spin backed by statistical analysis.

To add to this, the IMB reported pirate attacks on December 9th on two merchant vessels within a few miles of each other in the Gulf of Aden.

Knowing from first hand witness accounts that the two attacks on the 9th December did actually occur leaves me in no doubt that it does not matter whether what various international, national, or supra-national bodies declare are a fair representation of the situation, the fact remains that there is no shortage of Somalis who are able and willing to play the piracy game.

So if they are irrefutably still out there, now is not the time for anyone to relax their guard. It is imperative that vessels apply BMP4 measures when transiting through a recognized High Risk Area (HRA) and have competent crews, who are well trained in radar and visual lookout, and that the vessel has a robust citadel to fall back on in the worst case situation. But the passive measures will ultimately only slow the pirates down, and will not in themselves be sufficient to prevent a determined band of pirates from boarding.

Therefore, with Counter Piracy being a tertiary priority for most navies, the burden truly falls on the rapidly maturing private maritime security industry to provide security for the world' s merchant fleets, and to keep them safe as they navigate the world' s oceans.

To do this well, the whole industry needs to be involved in the adoption and development of international quality standards, such as ISO PAS 28007. But this has to be seen and judged against the financial pressures operating within the commercial maritime environment. Shipping companies are increasingly demanding a quality service at a price that gives them extremely good value for money.

The good maritime security companies can deliver a tailored service to the ship-owner at highly competitive prices, while retaining sufficient flexibility to provide it at relatively short notice. To achieve this, the successful companies are, and will be, those that take on a multi-national work force.

The most forward thinking companies have had Filipino, Indian, and most recently introduced, Sri Lankan teams at sea for over 18 months. In that time, these team members, most often under the direct leadership of European team leaders, have become highly reliable and skilled operators.

Training has been and is, of course, vital to ensure a quality service is provided, with the City & Guilds Maritime Security Operatives level 3 course being the gold standard. Moreover, the fact that it has been designed specifically to meet the training requirements mandated by ISO 28007 highlights the significant role of this standard in shaping the future of the industry.

ISO 28007 will be essential not only to regulate the growth and development of a maturing sector, but to ensure a much more professional and accountable industry base.

It demands the most exacting standards of compliance for maritime security companies, providing a formal mechanism by which they can be judged against operational, legal, and risk management criteria – covering aspects that range from the selection and vetting of security personnel to providing guidance on Rules for the Use of Force.

Compliance and training are major investments for any private company. Both, however, are needed and will prove that the private maritime security industry is on track and, in fact, leading the way to providing more secure and safe transit lanes at a time when there is increased global maritime trade on ungoverned oceans.

(Gerry Northwood, Chief Operating Officer for maritime security company GoAGT)