



Story

Atalanta chief on EU fight against pirates

"Operation Atalanta" is the codename for the EU anti-piracy campaign off the Somali coast, seeking to protect to vessels crossing these treacherous waters. It is no small task considering the size of the area the operation has to patrol. Operation Commander Rear-Admiral Peter Hudson of Britain's Royal Navy was in parliament this week to tell MEPs about the state of play and the main challenges the operation faces.

The word pirates conjures up images of swashbuckling outlaws on the high seas, but the reality is far from romantic. Piracy nowadays involves a well-organised criminal network with carefully prepared attacks on merchant, humanitarian, fishing and leisure vessels in which crews are routinely held hostage, threatened and, in a few dramatic cases, executed. It is a lucrative trade for pirates, causing huge financial losses for shipping companies.

Rear-Admiral Hudson said his mission is to "deter, disrupt and arrest pirates wherever possible". He told MEPs that pirates will attempt to seize any vessel sailing in the area, including World Food Programme ships and yachts. The Atalanta force protecting shipping in an area roughly "the size of Brussels to Moscow" includes ships from Belgium, the UK, France, Germany, Italy, Greece, the Netherlands, Spain and Sweden.

Not all vessels seek protection

The Admiral said it is difficult to bring the pirates to justice because arresting them requires the cooperation of other states, which is not always forthcoming.

In addition, not all vessels inform Operation Atalanta of their movements, particularly vessels owned by smaller companies, he said. "The (pirates') sophistication is increasing" and they are constantly "extending their horizons", he warned. Transport Committee Chair Brian Simpson urged vessels to take the advice of the EU naval force and get protection.

Fisheries Committee Vice-Chair Alain Cadec called for better protection of European fishing boats in the area. The Rear Admiral said Atalanta has good links with European fishermen and provided as much coverage for them as possible but "couldn't provide individual coverage without compromising elsewhere". He also warned of the emergence of "have-a-go" pirates: Somali fishermen who decide to try their hand at piracy.

Piracy in Somalian waters will be on Parliament's plenary agenda next week in Strasbourg.