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Naval action cuts Somali piracy -maritime official

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TURIN, Italy, Jan 28 (Reuters) - Patrols by international navies off Somalia have cut sea hijackings encouragingly, maritime authorities said on Wednesday, but a U.S. naval official said it was too early to be sure.

"The number of successful hijackings has come down for the second month. It is encouraging but let's wait and see what happens over the next two or three months," International Maritime Bureau director Pottengal Mukundan told Reuters.

"We attribute this (fall) to the actions of the navies there. We think it is having an effect. What we are calling for is sustained action of the navies."

He was speaking at a U.N. conference on maritime piracy. The IMB monitors maritime piracy and trade crime around the world.

However, Vice Admiral Robert Moeller, deputy commander of the U.S military command for Africa, Africom, was more cautious saying January's fall could be due to the weather. "That (a long-term trend) remains to be seen. There is not enough data on this. Some of this could be related to the environmental conditions in the region," he told Reuters at the same meeting.

All the same, "the presence of ships from a number of navies in the region is having some effect on pirate psychology", he said.

The northern coast of Somalia has become the most dangerous in the world for pirate attacks, forcing up insurance prices for vessels passing in the area. Hijackings have brought the pirates millions of dollars in ransoms.

Japan ordered its navy on Wednesday to prepare for deployment off Somalia as part of anti-piracy naval patrols which so far include the U.S., Russia, China, India and EU countries.

Mukundan said South Korea was also thinking of sending ships.

There have been 15 reports of piracy and two hijackings with 43 crew taken hostage off the Somali coast this month, Mukundan said.

In 2008, 111 acts of piracy were reported, with 42 hijackings and 815 crew taken hostage. In 2007, there were 31 acts of piracy, 12 hijackings and 177 hostages taken.

"The pirates are not succeeding in their action," Mukundan said, referring to latest trends. "They are making efforts but not getting the hijacked vessel."

"That is very good because it imposes a risk and cost on the pirates which may deter them in the future."

Insurance costs have yet to fall despite January's easing in hijacking numbers, Mukundan said.

One of the highest-profile hijackings took place in November when Saudi supertanker Sirius Star carrying \$100 million in crude oil was hijacked and only released Jan. 9 after a \$3 million ransom was paid.

After that, foreign navies agreed to step up patrols. (Reporting by Danilo Masoni, edited by Richard Meares)

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