The Cat is Now Out of the Bag

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Owners and suppliers of arms in the ship held hostage on Somalia high sea are now known

Piracy in the Somali waterways has revealed that Ukraine is secretly supplying arms to South Sudan. Three weeks ago, a Ukrainian ship, Faina, conveying Russian T-72 tanks and ammunitions was seized by Somalian pirates operating on the Somalian waterways. There have been conflicting reports about where its cargo was destined for since it was captured. Kenya has repeatedly insisted that the shipment was part of a programme to restock its military. But other sources said that it was bound for the autonomous government of South Sudan. A copy of the cargo manifest reportedly released last week to a news agency confirmed that the contract was issued on behalf of South Sudan. However, the Kenyan defence ministry was named as the consignee. But the contract numbers for the tanks, rocket-propelled grenade launchers and anti-aircraft guns had the initials GOSS, which is widely used to refer to the Government of South Sudan. Kenya helped in bringing an end to one of Africa’s longest and bloodiest conflicts in 2005 between South Sudan and the government in Khartoum. Two million lives were lost in the conflict. The shipment indicated an arms race between North and South Sudan which are reported to be building up their armed forces ahead of a referendum on independence for South Sudan in 2011. A military expert said a previous delivery of tanks had taken place last November. He said that South Sudan has received more than100 T-72 and T-55 Russian tanks. The South is not alone in acquiring new weaponry. The authorities in Khartoum were also reported to be re-equipping their armed forces from Malaysia, China and North Korea. But the pirates are not concerned about the contents of the ship. They have not given up in their effort to get a $20 million ransom. They are still holding on to the ship despite the presence of American and Russian warships waiting for a possible use of force if negotiations failed. USS Howard, a USA warship claimed last week to have had visual contact with the vessel and was monitoring the situation in it. The pirates have also vowed to destroy the ship, its cargo and its remaining 20 crew members after a crew member was lost due to illness, if any of the warships attacked them. The Somali government has given foreign powers the go ahead to use force against the pirates. Abdullahi Yusuf, the Somali president said the government has run out of patience and now wants to fight the pirates with the help of the international community. Cyrus Mody, a maritime analyst with the International Maritime Bureau, IMB, said that many of the Somali pirates are well trained, armed and have a good knowledge of vessels. He said they move with maritime radio to monitor traffic of ships in the area and predict their movements. According to him, the pirates use the tactics of sending out distress signals or messages saying they are stranded. This lures ships towards them and they attack using rocket propelled launchers. He said in one incident, the pirates operated from a mother ship, a large fishing boat with smaller speedboats on board, posed as thirsty fishermen in dire need of water, only to hijack the ship at gunpoint after being allowed on board. “They often operate from mother ships which enable them to attack vessels that are hundreds of miles out to sea,” he said. Colin Darch, a captain of a ship that was released after a ransom was paid, said many of the pirates are fishermen who began by attacking ships they believed were illegally threatening or destroying their business. He said businessmen and former fighters for the Somali warlords moved in when they saw how lucrative it could be. “They have backers who split the ransom 50-50 when they succeed, they made it plain to us that they are in it for the ransom money,” he said. Chatham House, a captain said piracy has become a lucrative business off the Somali coast. He said that in a study by a UK think-tank, $30 million has been paid as ransom to pirates this year off the Somali coast and that, the pirates are becoming more aggressive and assertive. “The inflation of ransom demands makes this an ever-more lucrative business and the number of hijack bids had more than doubled to 61 this year,” he said. According to him, the danger and cost of piracy meant ships could be forced to avoid the area and divert around the Cape of Good Hope instead. This will add extra weeks of travel and fuel consumptions as well as add considerably to the cost of transporting goods at a time when the price of oil is a major concern. While the Somali pirates activities are worrying world naval authorities. Herve Morin, French defence minister has hinted that European countries were getting prepared to end the illegal activities with the use of force. He said that at least eight EU countries have offered ships for a new force to help protect shipping in the area. France and the USA have also drafted a UN Security Council resolution in response to the Somali situation. This would authorise countries to chase and seize pirates when they flee into territorial waters.