

French firms work on anti-pirate ship of the future

NANTES: Blind them with light, drench them with water cannons or deafen them with sound blasts: these are some of the on-board anti-pirate features that figure in a project being developed in France.

The project was unveiled to some 400 delegates attending MARISK, a forum on shipping security held last week in Nantes in western France.

A series of traps and non-lethal defences are set to be installed on board the Partisan, a French military training vessel, in a 12-million-euro project piloted by the French Environment and Energy Management Agency (ADEME).

Aside from the armed guards used on some ships, the main anti-pirate defence measure currently deployed is water cannons that some crews use against aggressors but at the risk of themselves being targeted.

"The aim of this equipment is to make the boats difficult to board, to make them very hostile, unwelcoming for the pirates," said Eric Prang of Sagem, a French firm involved in the project.

Pirate attacks dropped slightly in 2011 for the first time in five years thanks to increased security, but the situation off Somalia is a growing concern, according to the International Maritime Bureau.

Around the globe there were 439 recorded incidents of piracy and armed robbery last year, with 802 crew members taken hostage.

Forty-five vessels were hijacked, 176 boarded and 113 fired upon. Eight crew were killed.

With grim figures like these in mind, the French project is likely to be keenly watched by shipping companies.

The anti-pirate measures on the Partisan begin with radar systems and infrared cameras that detect the danger as early as possible, allowing the crew to alert the authorities in the hope of being rescued by a warship.

If the pirates move closer to their target on board their skiffs, they can be hit with "long range acoustic devices" that blast them with pain-inducing sounds. They might then be hit with beams of blinding light.

If they are still not dissuaded, powerful remote-controlled water cannons can continue to blast them while the crew takes refuge in a "citadel", or safe room hidden in the boat.

From there the crew can use cameras to monitor the pirates and continue to sail their ship.

If despite all that the pirates manage to get on board, they will be met with tear gas canisters. The ship's corridors are plunged into darkness and flooded with smoke to disorientate the pirates.

All these defence mechanisms will be installed for testing on board the Partisan over the course of this year, with a view to bringing them to the market from 2014.

But a security official from a major shipping company at the Nantes forum said such measures would only be useful against amateur pirates.

"If you come up against hardened gangs, real pros like you get these days in Somalia, they are not going to be put off by smoke or by water cannon," said the official, requesting anonymity.

"I have already tried water cannon. That disorientated them a bit, but they still boarded the ship," he said.

"In fact, aside from armed guards, the only viable solution is speed. It's impossible to board a vessel that is doing 18-20 knots (33km-37km per hour) if your speedboat is going flat-out," he said.

"That is why the big container ships, which can move at these speeds, are not pirated in the Indian Ocean."

Source: AFP

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