

A dhow pirate mother-ship involved in attacks on merchant shipping in the Indian Ocean has been stopped and boarded by ships from the Royal Navy operating in the Indian Ocean. This action followed on from the successful rescue of the Italian Merchant Ship Monte Cristo on 11 October by the RFA Fort Victoria.

It is believed the dhow was hijacked by suspected pirates so that they could use it as a base, or mothership, from which to launch attacks against merchant ships many hundreds of miles from Somalia. Throughout this time, the Pakistani crew of the dhow was held hostage on board.

On Friday 14 October some 200 miles off the coast HMS Somerset and RFA Fort Victoria closed in on the dhow. HMS Somerset's Commanding Officer, Commander Paul Bristowe Royal Navy said, "The mother-ship was located by Somerset's Merlin helicopter at first light and the Boarding Teams brought to immediate notice whilst Somerset closed with the dhow".

HMS Somerset is currently assigned to the Combined Maritime Forces counter-piracy mission, Combined Task Force (CTF) 151. RFA Fort Victoria is deployed as part of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) Ocean Shield counter piracy task force.

The dhow was soon surrounded by a Royal Navy and Royal Marine boarding team from RFA Fort Victoria, supported by HMS Somerset's helicopter. RFA Fort Victoria's Commanding Officer, Captain Shaun Jones RFA, said, "This operation demanded high levels of seamanship to ensure that the dhow was kept under close observation as the boarding party moved in."

The suspected pirates capitulated as the boarding team scaled the vessel's side. Captain Rod Yapp Royal Marines, the commander of the boarding team, said, "Approaching the dhow before boarding was quite tense. Through my weapon sight I could see dark figures moving in the shadows on the bridge. We quickly boarded and secured the dhow then mustered the 24 occupants on her bow."

In the run up to being boarded, the suspect pirates were observed by Somerset's Merlin helicopter ditching equipment and weapons overboard as well as setting one of their skiffs adrift. Despite their desperate attempts to cover their tracks, a large cache of boarding ladders, weapons, a second attack skiff and equipment from a previously pirated ship were found onboard. Captain Yapp said "There was a clear indication that the suspected pirates found on the dhow were well-practised and knew what they were doing. One of the weapons had recently been fired and was well maintained - as was the RPG rocket. I think that if we hadn't disrupted this group of suspected pirates, it is quite possible that they would have attacked another merchant vessel."

The dhow's crew of 20 were free to go on their way once the evidence gathering had finished.

The four suspected pirates that were apprehended, however, have been passed to Italian authorities, on suspicion of their involvement in the attack on the MV Monte Cristo three days earlier.

Captain Gerry Northwood OBE Royal Navy, Commanding Royal Navy assets in this operation, said "Somali-based piracy seeks to undermine the freedom of the seas across a wide area. Their victims are local traders and fishermen of the Indian Ocean as well as sailors in the large merchant ships carrying the vital trade on which the UK economy depends. This decisive and timely action by the Royal Navy, along with the rescue of the Monte Cristo on 11 October, will send a strong message to those who wish to commit piracy in this part of the world".