

# Comment

## Once again pirates rule the waves

**P**iracy would seem to belong to a bygone age of Spanish galleons, pieces of eight and freebooters singing, "Sixteen men on a dead man's chest." Surprisingly, piracy is alive and well and thriving.

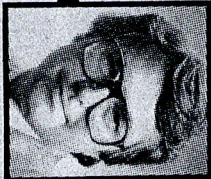
Lloyd's of London recently announced that piracy has reached "alarming levels," and shipowners have turned to the UN for help in combating an upsurge in buccaneering. The U.S., which raised howls of indignation over what it called a "pirate attack" against the *Achille Lauro*, had previously taken little notice of piracy. So long as TV cameras were not involved, no one in Washington seemed to care about far-off freebooters.

Piracy has become a real scourge. From 1980 to 1984, according to UN figures, 1,376 people have been killed by pirates, 582 abducted and 2,283 raped. Many more have died or been abducted in unrecorded attacks that have left no survivors or witnesses. "Dead men," goes the old pirate saying, "tell no tales."

The greatest concentration of such attacks occurs in the South China, Sulu and Philippine Seas, an area that roughly includes Indochina, Malaysia, Singapore and the Philippines. Malay and Thai fishermen, descendants of fierce Sea Dayak tribes, have turned increasingly to preying on coastal commerce in the congested waters off Indochina and in the Gulf of Thailand.

The upsurge in piracy over the past decade may be in large part attributed to the flight of Vietnam's boat people. These refugees offered a tempting target of opportunity since many fled their homeland with gold bars and jewels. Thai and Malay pirates would board the Vietnamese boats, rob the passengers, rape the

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females and then often kill everyone. A few fortunate young women might be spared and either taken aboard pirate boats as slaves or sold to brothels ashore.

By 1983, attacks by pirates on boat people had become so frequent that the U.S., French and Malaysian navies took up patrolling the infested waters. Occasional anti-pirate patrols are still conducted. Now that the outflow of boat people has sharply dropped, pirates have turned their attention to coastal shipping and even large freighters and tankers.

Ships crossing the narrow Malacca Strait or running down Thailand's Kra Isthmus routinely mount armed night guards, lest they be boarded by pirates operating from fast launches. In the Mariana Islands off the Philippines and on Sabah (Malaysian Borneo) pirates have stormed ashore to attack local banks and to enjoy nights of rape and pillage. Coastal communities in these regions live in growing fear of seaborne raids.

These modern pirates are not the jolly swashbucklers of Hollywood epics, certainly not the Long John Silvers of our imagination. They are exceedingly cruel, cold-blooded killers who show no mercy to their victims and often torture them for amusement.

Asian pirates have competitors along the marshy coast of West Africa. Nigerian river and coastal pirates are the most notorious, preying on freighters that are lying off Nigeria's congested ports.

Using long dugout canoes, and armed with cutlasses, spears and guns, these pirates storm aboard ships at night, questing for cash, liquor and arms. So dangerous are Nigeria's ports that many shipping lines have ceased calling.

Soviet and other East bloc ships now arm their crews with automatic weapons and do not, like their western counterparts, hesitate to blast any intruders. As a result, communist ships are rarely attacked. Cruising around ships moored at night in West African ports can be a dangerous outing.

River pirates are also active on the mighty Congo, sometimes on the Zambesi, and along the Amazon's innumerable tributaries. Attacks also occur along rivers in central and northern Burma, Thailand, Laos and the Philippines. In the latter nation, we must also add the Moros, ferocious Moslem tribesmen who prey on river traffic, coastal commerce and anything having to do with the despised central government in Manila. The Moros call themselves freedom fighters. Manila calls them pirates.

What to do with pirates? The main problems are jurisdiction and organized action. An ideal solution would be multi-national flotillas under UN command, tasked with rooting out pirate bases and making ports and sea lanes safe for commerce. What to do with captured pirates? Jail, most likely. But one is surely tempted to suggest recourse to more traditional chastisement — the gibbet and yardarm.