

## Sentek plan empowers commercial shippers to prevent pirate attacks

By ERIN BRIDGES, The Daily Transcript

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As piracy off the coast of Somalia continues to capture the attention of Americans, one local company is working to help commercial shipping companies reduce the risk of being hijacked.

San Diego-based **Sentek Consulting** has been working with governments of the Philippines and African nations to improve communication and combat terrorism.

The same basic model can be used in a maritime setting to share information among ships and help captains plot the safest route.

While the lawlessness and lack of real government structure within Somalia are problematic, leaders at Sentek say the best immediate action for combating piracy is to empower the shipping industry with information.

Sentek's plan combines its unclassified information sharing systems designed for intra- and inter-government communication with the Navy's model of having a shared system to communicate and interact on the seas.

"The end game with piracy is not to cowboy up and go shoot some pirates," said Eric Basu, founder, president and CEO of Sentek Consulting. "There are a couple different ways to go about it.

"From a commercial situation ... there is not enough information out there for them to make a calculated risk of where to go and what the cost could be."

To fill the need, Sentek is taking steps to provide captains with a regularly updated virtual environment identifying factors such as other vessels on the water, location of security forces, fishing grounds, high-threat zones, typically safe zones and the means to be in constant, secured communication with other ships to alert them of new threats and receive help when necessary.

Instead of imposing strict rules on when, where and with whom a ship can travel, the idea is that a captain will have all the information necessary to determine the best route for his ship, based on his capabilities and company policies.

"(It would have) all kinds of marine-related data that could help you make a decision that you as a sovereign ship captain would want to do," said Hamlin Tallent, vice president of C4ISR systems for Sentek.

"Depending on the ship's company, you may see information that causes you to turn around. You may see information that would let you convoy up with other ships that might have some kind of security escort. You might see information (that tells you) to change course and avoid predicted hotspots."

Basu and Tallent will be in Washington, D.C., this week to meet with officials regarding their initiatives in Africa and the Philippines. They also will be discussing the maritime component.

Meanwhile, they also are trying to get in touch with Maersk Line to tell them about their plan to help communicate on the seas.

Maersk Line owns the cargo ship *Maersk Alabama*, which was attacked by Somali pirates April 8, thrusting piracy issues into the spotlight as it became the first U.S.-flagged ship attacked off the African coast in about 200 years.

A four-day standoff between pirates and the U.S. Navy ended when U.S. Navy SEALs shot three pirate captors and rescued the ship's captain, who was being held hostage on a lifeboat.

This time, the situation ended well with SEALs taking necessary force and saving the hostage, said Basu, a former SEAL.

The U.S. military is not the world's police force, he said. And the Navy cannot always step into a pirate situation and save the day.

The SEALs who fired the shots are highly trained and highly skilled at what they do. Shooting from one moving ship onto another floating vessel is a dangerous and costly situation.

"That cost us \$3 (million) or \$4 million dollars just from a monetary perspective," Basu said. "And eventually, you're going to end up with a dead hostage."

But strong communication among those in pirated waters would allow shippers to protect themselves.

The system would not require the development of any new technologies. And the information it would provide already exists, it just has not been put together in one place in a format useful for the shipping industry.

"It was never required for commercial (shipping) before," Basu said. "Now it is beneficial for command and control programs to help combat piracy."