

Piracy 'cannot be solved at sea'

The new commander of the European Union's anti-piracy naval operation has told the BBC that piracy can only be solved diplomatically - not at sea.

Rear Adm Peter Hudson's comments come on the day a Dutch cargo ship was released after being held by Somali pirates since early May.



Rear Adm Peter Hudson says bringing stability to Somalia is crucial

One Ukrainian sailor was shot dead and eight other crew members injured.

Rear Adm Hudson says successful pirate attacks fell in the past six months but a "full solution" lies ashore.

He said the key was to bring stability to Somalia, which has been without a stable government since 1991.

Known as Atalanta, the operation off the Horn of Africa was launched last December to deter and prevent piracy and armed robberies off the Somali coast.

See map of how piracy is affecting the region and countries around the world

Two dozen ships from European Union nations, including Britain, France, Germany and Italy, patrol an area of about two million sq miles.

Earlier this month, EU ministers agreed to extend the operation until the end of 2010, saying that "piracy off the coast of Somalia is likely to remain a serious threat".

Speaking exclusively to BBC Radio 4's PM programme and for the first time since taking control of the mission, Rear Adm Hudson pointed to some successes.

He said: "Six months ago, one in three attacks by pirates was successful, that's now down to one in 10.

"But it's still an area where they can get money relatively quickly, so we need to ensure that the merchant community, trading along these routes, keep their self-protective measures - the way they manoeuvre their ships, the way they safeguard, the way they share intelligence with our military forces in the region - alive to the risk."

🌐 The EU, along with the United Nations and the African Union, is working very hard to try to inject stability into Somalia ”

Rear Adm Peter Hudson

Nearly 20,000 ships pass through the Gulf of Aden, off Somaila's northern coast, each year, heading to and from the Suez Canal.

And Rear Adm Hudson admits he does not have the power to tell them which routes to take in order to minimise the chances of a pirate attack.

"I provide advice for suitable shipping routes, through the Indian Ocean. I tell them where my warships are. I've given them facilities to talk to me, to my ships, we exchange information and details of suspicious activity," he said.

"We've got a good open engagement with the merchant community - but at the end of the day it's a commercial venture so they can decide whether to take it or leave it. I have to say the majority are taking our advice on board."

Targets of opportunity

So far in 2009, there have been 31 successful hijackings from 143 attempted attacks. The release of the Dutch ship MV Marathon brings the number of ships still held by pirates down to 13, with a total of almost 200 sailors on board.

Operation Atalanta's commander admits the mission's success has had consequences elsewhere in the region - and presents new challenges.

"They [the pirates] are spreading their net further. We've had a vessel detained off Oman, 1,000-1,200 miles from Somalia, others nearer Madagascar than Mogadishu," Rear Adm Hudson said.

"The pirates are using mother ships, they're extending their range, they're looking to take 'targets of opportunity' across a very wide ocean - and that complicates the mission.

Illegal activity

"We've been reasonably successful in the Gulf of Aden in making sure that the merchant ships are aware of our presence, but the net is going wider and we need to work closely with the assets we have available to try to inject similar levels of security in the wider Indian Ocean."

Ultimately, though, diplomacy will help end the scourge of piracy, according to Rear Adm Hudson.

"Illegal activity off the coast of Somalia is not necessarily something which will get solved at sea. The solution lies ashore," he said.

"The EU, along with the United Nations and the African Union, is working very hard to try to inject stability into Somalia and work with the transitional government there to do so.

"But until those efforts are successful, one of the principal roles for Atalanta is keeping shipping routes safe and open."