

Somalia warns of return to piracy



Image copyright AFP

Image caption The number of pirate attacks off Somalia has sharply declined

In northern Somalia, government officials are warning of a revival of piracy, unless foreign nations - and the naval armada patrolling the coast - do more to help create jobs and security ashore, and to combat illegal fishing at sea.

At first glance, the ramshackle fishing port of Eyl looked much like it did in 2009, when I first drove down a narrow canyon from the surrounding plateau, accompanied by armed security guards, and walked across the white sands towards the sea.

But this time, the hijacked vessels moored offshore were gone - so too were the conspicuously expensive 4 x 4 vehicles with tinted windows that we had seen racing past us.

"We knew it was wrong. But we did it anyway," said Farah, a man in his 30s, who walked across the beach to show me his fishing boat.

He admitted he had been a shore-based pirate leader in Eyl, running a crew of 23 men who had hijacked a Turkish fishing boat and a South Korean cargo vessel in 2008.

"They dropped the ransoms from a small plane into the sea," he explained - \$1.8m and \$2m (£1.3m) in turn.

"We spent it, or gave it away. The religious leaders and the government persuaded us to stop. I would never become a pirate again. I am just an ordinary fisherman now," he said, although that seemed at

odds with his noticeably expensive clothes.



Image copyright AFP

Image caption The waters off Somalia are rich in fish

As we spoke, local officials at the edge of the village were marshalling a crowd.

They started to chant slogans - mostly aimed at foreign fishing trawlers, which they said were plundering Somalia's coastal resources, and making it impossible for them to make a living from fishing.

If the protest seemed a little contrived, the frustrations in Eyl are certainly not. I joined a group of men in the local teashop, who bitterly condemned the lack of development, and employment.

"If I don't get a job soon, then yeah, sure, maybe I can go back to piracy. Anything can happen. All these people can be pirates," said unemployed teacher Daoud Ali Mohamed, 28, gesturing around the room.

For years it has been an accepted truth that in the long term, Somali piracy can only be conclusively dealt with onshore.

The foreign warships patrolling off the coast - and the armed guards now present on many vessels - have been effective, but the pirates "are not dead, but dormant now, so they will come definitely... straight away, no question about it [as soon as the warships leave]," said Puntland's Counter-Piracy Minister Abdalla Jama Saleh.

Puntland at a glance:

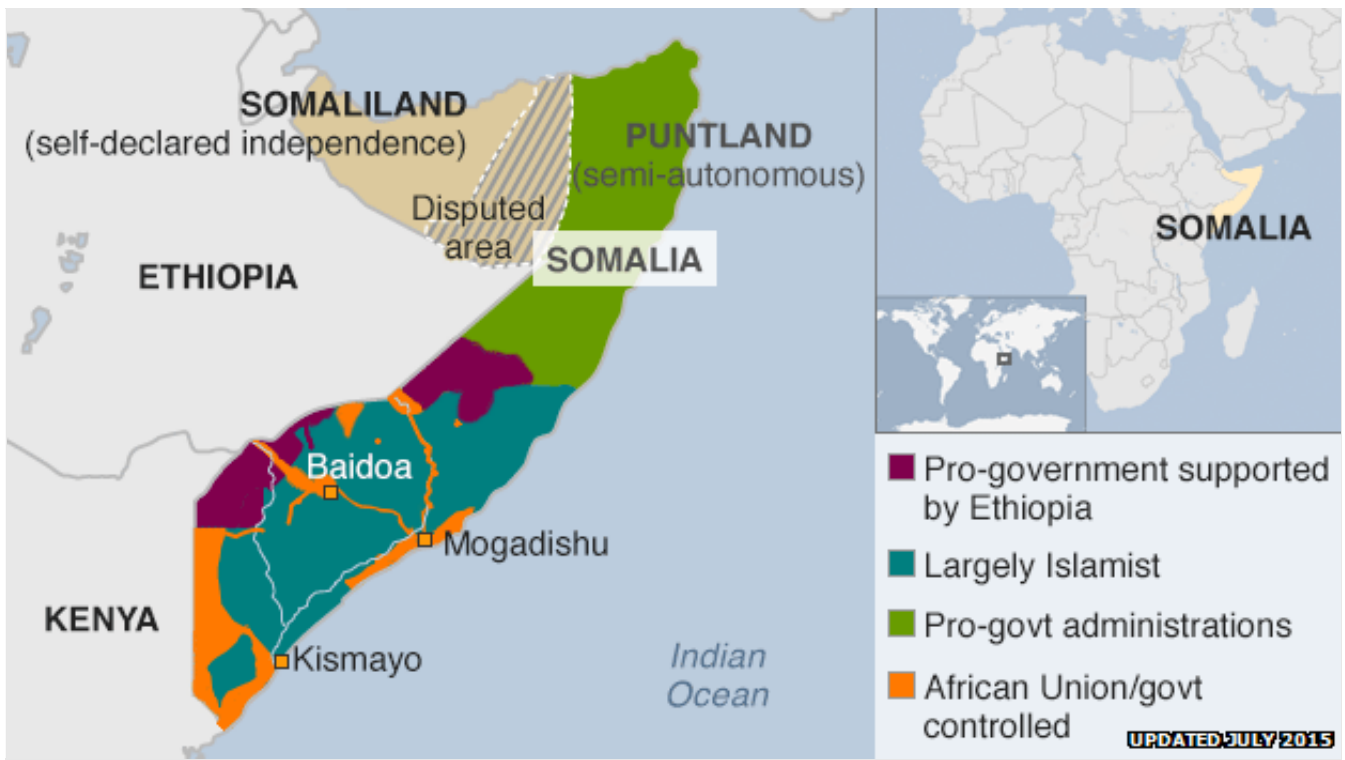


Image copyright Updated July 2015

- Declared itself autonomous state within Somalia in 1998
- Not seeking independence like neighbouring Somaliland
- From 2005, became main base for pirates
- Also centre of people trafficking trade to Yemen, until conflict broke out there

Find out more about Puntland

Four hours drive away from Eyl, in Puntland's capital, Garowe, a brand new prison is the most visible sign of the outside world's attempt to fight piracy ashore.

The UK is among a group of European nations that paid for its construction.

"It's already reduced piracy. It helped young people to see that other colleagues are in prison... for long, long sentences. It's a warning signal. And it is to rehabilitate inmates," said Abdirizak Jama, from the United Nation's Office on Drugs and Crime.

But although the prison looks clean and impressively secure - a particularly important advantage in a region where prisons raids and escapes are commonplace - the 17 convicted pirates I saw all appeared to be "foot soldiers" rather than pirate leaders.

"I do not deserve to be here," said 20-year-old Yusuf Galgal, who'd been caught at sea and put on trial in the Seychelles. "I was underage when I was sentenced."



Image caption It is hoped the new prison will deter other would-be pirates

The cells also contained a number of convicted members of the militant group al-Shabab, including Aweil Ali Farah, 27, who was sentenced to death.

"I was a school teacher. Someone had a grudge against me and told the police. I'm not in al-Shabab. They're terrorists, fundamentalists, Islamists. I'm waiting for the death penalty. I'm worried," he said, showing where he'd written: "There is no justice here," on his red prison uniform.

In his heavily guarded compound on a nearby hilltop, Puntland's President Abdiweli Ali Gaas urged the international community to do much more, both onshore and at sea.

Accusing the west of "double standards," the president said foreign navies were only concerned about stopping Somali piracy - which more or less halted in 2012 - and were doing nothing to tackle the "highway robbery" of foreign fishing trawlers [largely Iranian] plundering Somalia's natural resources.

"This may rekindle the issue of piracy," President Abdiweli warned.



Image copyright AFP

Image caption A lack of jobs in Somalia could entice young men to resort to piracy once again

But the issue is complicated. After decades of internal conflict, Somalia is still struggling to negotiate the terms of its reintegration as a nation-state.

Different administrations have been issuing fishing licenses, and while Puntland believes it is currently being cheated of hundreds of millions of dollars in revenues, there are deep concerns about corruption.

"There's uncertainty between the federal government [of Somalia] and regions [like Puntland] for fishing companies regarding the validity of licenses and who to buy from," said Alan Cole, who heads the UNODC's anti-piracy programme in East Africa.

Puntland now has its own well-trained Maritime Police Force, funded by the UAE. But it is far too small to patrol even a portion of Somalia's coastline - the longest on the continent.