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Issue 221 of the series reviews, analyses and threat assesses the fragile and conflict affected coastal states Libya, Somalia and Yemen. The Mediterranean migrant crisis, incidents affecting maritime security and influencing maritime news are also reported and analysed, focusing on the keys theatres of maritime instability.

Coronavirus Port and Terminal Restrictions
The current situation remains extremely fluid. For the most recent updates on closures and re-openings, MAST Security recommends using the Wilhemsen Covid-19 Global Port Restrictions Map. Please Click Here to visit their site.

Gerry Northwood, Chairman
MAST Security:

As can be seen from further reading of this weekly report, the Covid-19 pandemic is not proving a deterrent to criminals or others who wish the shipping and ports communities harm. General Hafter’s operations in Libya are continuing despite promises to the contrary, maritime criminal gangs operating out of Nigeria have continued to kidnap seafarers, and the war in Yemen continues to impact on the maritime environment.

With national governments almost entirely focused on combating the Covid-19 virus pandemic, and the additional commercial and logistics pressures this in turn is placing on commercial shipping, it is an important time to ensure that collectively we keep our “eye on the ball”, and by doing so, avoid inadvertently presenting criminals and terrorists, or indeed rogue state actors, in the Middle East, far east, Indian Ocean and elsewhere, with a golden opportunity to cause harm and endanger seafarer’s lives.

MAST strongly recommends that now is the time to be refreshing or undertaking reviews of security plans and assumptions. In parallel with this, masters, crews and security teams should pay close attention to situational awareness and pattern of life in the shipping lanes and around the approaches to ports and anchorages.

For further guidance and advice, please do not hesitate to contact MAST on operations@mast-security.com or call +44 (0) 7827 359132.
Incidents:  
1. Late report: Group of perpetrators boarded anchored Singapore-flagged barge towed by tug boat from their boats at 1430 LT in position 22°06.21N - 091°40.67E, Chittagong Anchorage, Bangladesh. The barge was installed with a crane. The perpetrators boarded the barge, cut the safety system wiring, and stole the crane datalogger display, portable batteries for machineries (e.g. crane, generators, and hydraulic power pack), along with diesel and hydraulic oil. Reported (ReCAAP) 6th Mar. (Not shown on chart)

UKMTO warns of drifting naval mines
Drifting mines have been reported in an area of Yemen and Saudi Red Sea coastal waters. There is no specific threat to vessels following recognised shipping routes. In response a NAVAREA IX Navigation Warning has been issued: NAVAREA IX. 071/20.  
Southern Red Sea and Farasan Bank.  
Charts BA 157, 2964 AND 4071.  
Mines reported adrift in area bounded by  
A. 16-45.60N 042-15.70E  
B. 15-41.50N 042-39.40E  
C. 15-54.00N 043-02.30E  
D. 16-58.70N 042-35.10E

Indian Customs cracks down on fishing boats with Chinese tracking devices
To ensure the security of the coastline and prevent smuggling activities through the sea route, Customs has launched a crackdown on fishing vessels operating from Kerala shores using China-made Automatic Identification System-tracking devices which are mandatory for vessels now. The decision was taken after multiple agencies raised concerns regarding security issues following fishing boats fitted with the Chinese AIS were found on the Kerala coast.

India, France conduct joint patrols from Reunion Island
India and France, for the first time, have conducted joint patrols from the Reunion Island, signalling New Delhi’s intent to engage with friendly foreign partners in expanding its footprint in the Indian Ocean, focusing on the stretch between the East African coastline and the Malacca straits. India has so far carried out Coordinated Patrols (CORPAT) only with maritime neighbours and had rejected a similar offer by the US.

Australia Hands Over Command of CTF 150 to France
On March 19th, Royal Australian Navy Commodore (CDRE) Ray Leggatt handed over command of Combined Task Force 150 (CTF 150) to a combined French / United Kingdom team led by French Marine Nationale Captain Jacques Rivière in a ceremony in Bahrain.

HMS Defender Returns To Portsmouth After Seven-Month Deployment
The Royal Navy’s HMS Defender has returned to Portsmouth after a seven-month deployment that included accompanying British-flagged ships through the Strait of Hormuz. During the deployment, the Type 45 destroyer escorted 38 merchant ships - carrying 1.6 million tonnes of cargo - through the Strait of Hormuz.

To see MAST’s services in the Indian Ocean Region, please click here.
Somalia

Somalia's Ministry of Transport and Aviation announced the reopening of the country's airspace to allow stranded citizens to come back home on March 21st. In a statement, the ministry said a 15-day ban on all international flights will take effect after the 48 hours lapse. The statement said only cargo planes carrying food and medicines will be allowed into the country after the 48 hours.

Al Shabaab threatens Americans in East Africa
Al Shabaab, al Qaeda's branch in Somalia and the terror group's largest and most active global affiliate, has issued specific new threats against Americans in East Africa and even the United States. U.S. counterterrorism officials and intelligence analysts say. Several ominous signs indicate that Al Shabaab is seeking to expand its reach well beyond its home base, and attack Americans wherever it can, the New York Times reported on March 22nd.

6 Al Shabaab militants killed
Somali National Army (SNA) backed by international partners killed six al-Shabab extremists on Sunday in the southern region of Lower Juba, a military officer confirmed on Monday 23rd. Hassan Mohamed Aden, commander of the 5th Unit of SNA, told the reporters that the army conducted an operation in villages in Lower Juba region.

US kills 15 Al Shabaab terrorists in airstrikes
U.S. airstrikes in Somalia killed more than 15 Al Shabaab terrorists who were battling African Union and Somali forces. U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) spokesman Major Karl Wiest told VOA on Friday 20th. The militants posed an “imminent threat” to international forces who, according to a U.S. defense official, have now secured the town of Janaale in the country’s Lower Shabelle region and are building a forward operating base there.

Kenya Defence Forces attack Al Shabaab camp
Kenyan Defense Forces (KDF) claimed they attacked Al Shabaab’s Korisa Kotile Camp in Nginda near the Boni Forest in Lamu County in southern Kenya on March 19th. The KDF killed 12 Al Shabaab militants, captured one, and recovered several weapons and ammunition. A KDF official stated that the attack was part of an operation targeting militants responsible for an attempted attack on the KDF Kotile Special Operations Group Camp on March 13.

Efforts continue to smooth regional political rifts
Puntland State President Said Deni announced on March 19th that he will visit the Somali capital Mogadishu to lobby for political discussions between the Somali Federal Government (SFG) and its member states. Deni seeks to ease tensions between the SFG and its members states. Puntland State officials hosted a three-day forum for former and current SFG member state representatives and regional leaders in mid-March.

Al Shabaab targets base with mortars
Al Shabaab fired five mortar shells on African Union Mission to Somalia’s (AMISOM) Halane base camp in the Somali capital Mogadishu on March 18th. Local sources reported an unspecified number of casualties, however, AMISOM has not yet commented on the attack.

Analysis
Al Shabaab continues to mount operations throughout the country, despite efforts by US Central Command to degrade its capabilities with ongoing airstrikes which aim to remove AS leadership. It is questionable as to whether this “body count” policy is working.

Threat Assessment
The political situation has seen increased tension between regional states and the Federal Government. Should this continue, there is an opportunity for criminal organisations to return to their previous maritime activities. Al Shabaab continues to challenge the government and efforts to disrupt its operations continue, although AMISOM forces will withdraw some time in 2019. The trade in illegal charcoal by terror and crime groups continues, although the Combined Maritime Forces and UN are working on measures to prevent it. Youth unemployment in Somalia has not improved with 67% of Somali male youths aged between 14 to 29 unemployed. Pirate financiers offer lucrative and attractive opportunities, and were seen to be increasingly active in the last inter-monsoon period. Recent incidents off Somalia have highlighted the robust protections offered by both BMPs and well-trained, vigilant armed protection teams. Illegal fishing has returned to the region and there are wider political concerns that it could spark a resurgence in maritime crime unless checked. There is a risk that complacency in some quarters has seen a reduction in PMSC presence in these waters that could result in a piracy success. A lack of adherence to BMP5 protocol, particularly not maintaining a safe distance off the coast, has increased risks to shipping. Merchant vessels would be wise to maintain the same distance from the coast, particularly ensuring that the Socotra Gap isn’t taken. All vessels are advised to update risk assessments and register with UKMTO/MSCHOA prior to entering the Indian Ocean High Risk Area (HRA).

Control of Somali territory (March 2017) Source: Wikimedia Commons

- Under control of Al Shabaab and allies
- Under control of neutral forces
- Under control of Government and allies
- Somaliland Government
- Territory disputed by Puntland and Somaliland

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Coalition forces destroy Houthi ‘boat bombs’
Statement by the Official Spokesman of the Coalition to Restore Legitimacy in Yemen COL Turki Al-Malki:
“This morning, Tuesday 17th March 2020, Coalition Naval forces detected an attempt by the terrorist Iran-backed Houthi militia to conduct an imminent hostile, terrorist act in Southern Red Sea using (2) R/C exploding boats launched from Hodeida governorate. The two boats, representing a threat to regional and international security as well as SLOCs and international trade in Southern Red Sea and Bab-el-Mandeb strait, were tackled and destroyed.”

Saudi airlifted critical supplies to Yemen to fight coronavirus
Saudi Arabia has airlifted critical supplies to Yemen to assist in the country’s fight against the coronavirus outbreak. The airlift came a day after The King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Centre (KSRelief) held a meeting with representatives from WHO to assess the health needs of the war-torn country as it confronts the coronavirus crisis.

Southern forces deployed again in Yemen amid soaring tension
Forces loyal to the Southern Transitional Council (STC) were deployed again on Sunday 22nd in Yemen’s southern province of Abyan following two months of withdrawal, a government official said. “The STC’s military units were deployed again in some areas in the neighboring province of Abyan amid military extensive military preparations,” a local pro-government official told Xinhua on condition of anonymity.

Two Emirates Red Crescent aid workers killed
Two aid workers have been killed in war-torn Yemen’s south after they were kidnapped by unknown armed men, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) branch of the Red Crescent said on March 21st. The two were kidnapped in the southern port city of Aden and later found dead, according to the statement.

Griffiths Calls for Speeding up Prisoner Swap
UN special envoy for Yemen Martin Griffiths has called for measures that would speed up the release of prisoners over coronavirus concerns. The envoy wrote on his Twitter account that Yemeni parties should take the necessary measures to accelerate the release of prisoners and allow them to go home safely, media outlets reported on March 21st.

Saudi-backed forces declare control of sites in Yemen’s Jawf province
The Saudi-backed forces fighting on behalf of the exiled Yemeni President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi claimed to be in control of several military sites in the Al-Yatimah area, north of Al-Jawf province on March 20th, where fierce battles against the joint Houthis and Yemeni armed forces have been taking place over the past two months.

Concerns over oil storage vessel intensify
Several countries wrote a joint letter addressed to the UN Security Council (UNSC) on March 19th urging the UNSC to increase pressure on the al Houthi movement to allow the UN to inspect a Yemeni oil tanker docked at al Hudaydah port in al Hudaydah governorate in western Yemen.

Yemen’s Legitimate Government Sets Conditions for Return of Liaison Officers to Hodeidah
Yemeni Foreign Minister Mohammad al-Hadhrami said the decision to suspend the work of the government team in the Re-deployment Coordination Committee (RCC) in Hodeidah came in response to the militias’ continued refusal to implement the Hodeidah Agreement. In order for the government team to resume its work, Hadhrami stressed that a number of measures must be taken. These include securing observation points, removing landmines, pressuring Houthis to allow the deployment of UN monitors at all observation points and moving the headquarters of the UN Yemen Observation Mission (UNYOM) to a neutral location.

To see the latest threat analysis and Yemen port information in MASTOPDEIA, please click here.

 mast recommends BMP measures be enforced and watches strengthened during transits in the region.
The European Union and Italy are assisting human rights abuses through their indispensable support to the Libyan coast guard which identifies refugees and migrants at sea and orders commercial ships to intercept and return them to torture and inhumane detention conditions in Libya, The New York Times reported. “To hinder migrants crossing the Mediterranean, European navies stopped rescuing them. Now commercial ships are tasked with saving lives – and returning migrants to war-torn Libya,” Patrick Kingsley wrote in the article, “Privatized Pushbacks: How Merchant Ships Guard Europe” published on Friday 20th in The New York Times.

TRNC rescues asylum seekers rejected by Greek Cyprus
Turkish Cypriot security forces on Saturday 21st rescued 175 Syrian asylum seekers off the coast of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) from a floundering boat, after authorities in the island’s south stopped them from disembarking the previous day. The group of asylum seekers, whose boat was struggling 10 meters (32.8 feet) from the shore, included 30 women and 69 children, said sources, who asked not to be named due to restrictions on speaking to the media.

Libya: 85 percent of migrants subjected to torture
A report by the organization Doctors for Human Rights has found that 85% of migrants and refugees who reached Italy from Libya had been subjected to torture in the African country. Doctors for Human Rights (MEDU) released a report titled “The Torture Factory”. The organization gathered accounts from more than 3,000 migrants and refugees who had reached Italy from Libya between 2014 and 2020.

Assisting migrants at risk as coronavirus strikes Italy
Despite a drastic fall in the number of arrivals on Italian shores in March, the coronavirus pandemic that hit Italy hard is putting the country’s migrant assistance network in a double emergency. Experts attribute the almost-total stop of migrants’ arrivals this month to the fast spread of the virus in Italy, where COVID-19 has so far claimed more than 6,000 lives.

The current migrant smuggling situation
As the coronavirus pandemic increases, we note a drop in the number of crossing attempts, as people smugglers in Libya begin to deal with increased efforts to lock down the country’s embarkation points and ports. With the ongoing conflict in Libya still claiming lives despite discussion of a limited truce over the weekend of March 21st-22nd, the situation remains extremely unstable, with migrants trapped between both forces and possible discrimination due to fears over the spread of the virus. The situation will no doubt worsen in the coming weeks, as more EU states introduce port closures and lockdowns to delay the spread of the virus. We wait to see what action UN agencies may take to prevent migrants being targeted.
Libya’s UN-recognised government has become the latest administration to impose a lockdown to prevent the spread of the coronavirus pandemic. The Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA) declared a night-time curfew and closure of public spaces starting on Sunday 22nd to keep the virus out of areas it controls. In a statement on Saturday, the government said the curfew would begin at 6pm and end at 6am. It also ordered the closure of restaurants, cafes and party halls and banned funeral and wedding ceremonies.

Libya's navy forces seize ship transporting aviation fuel to Haftar
The commander of the navy forces of the Volcano of Rage Operation, Colonel Rida Issa has revealed that their forces were able to seize a ship flying the Liberian flag involved in transporting aviation fuel to Haftar. The Liberian-tagged ship was called “Gulf Petroleum 4” Issa explained, noting that the operation was carried out on Sunday 22nd evening. Maritime Bulletin reported that an explosion had taken place on the vessel, with a number of crew injured, but we are unable to confirm this at the time of writing.

Haftar continues Tripoli assault amid pandemic
The militias of renegade Libyan commander Khalifa Haftar are violating Libya's cease-fire deal as the world is busy with the coronavirus outbreak, a Libyan political analyst warned on Tuesday 24th. “Haftar’s forces are unable to advance on the ground and his warplanes have become ineffective since Turkey helped the Government of National Accord (GNA) to set up anti-aircraft batteries,” Salah al-Bakkush told Anadolu Agency.

6 killed by indiscriminate shelling in Libya’s Tripoli
Six civilians have been killed by indiscriminate shelling by the eastern-based army in Libya in south of the capital Tripoli, the UN-backed Libyan government said on Monday 23rd. Six others were injured in the shelling within 48 hours, said Mohamed Gonono, spokesman of the forces of the UN-backed Libyan government, in a statement.

‘Russia’s Wagner tried to bring Gadhafi’s son to power,’ report says
The Wagner Group, a Russian paramilitary company, met with the son of Libya’s deposed ruler Moammar Gadhafi to bring him into power, Bloomberg claimed in an article Saturday 21st. The article penned by Samer al-Atrush asserted a relationship between Gadhafi’s son Saif al-Islam and Russia.

EU still bickering over Libya arms embargo mission
EU member states are still bickering over the details of a new naval mission to enforce an arms embargo on Libya, the bloc’s diplomatic chief said on Monday 23rd. The 27 states agreed in principle to the mission in the Mediterranean, dubbed Operation Irene, last month, but they are still at odds over what to do with any migrants who might be picked up during its work.

UN welcomes response by Libyan parties to calls for humanitarian pause
The United Nations on Saturday 21st welcomed the “positive responses” of Libya’s Tripoli-based government and the Libyan National Army (LNA) to calls for a pause to stop the fighting, in the hopes that this would allow humanitarian access throughout the crisis-torn country and head off the potential threat of COVID-19.

Haftar’s forces daunted by fears of Coronavirus-infected foreign mercenaries
Some fighters from Khalifa Haftar’s forces have lately withdrawn from frontlines in southern Tripoli due to fears that Coronavirus is spreading among foreign mercenaries fighting with them, according to news circulated on social media. A circulated letter by Haftar’s General Command warns fighters not to leave their positions over concerns that there are Coronavirus cases among the foreign mercenaries.

25 Haftar militia members killed in Tripoli
Forces of Libya’s UN-recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) neutralized 25 militia members loyal to renegade General Khalifa Haftar early on Friday 20th during clashes in the capital. Tripoli-based Febrayer TV reported that troops taking part in the GNA’s Volcano of Rage Operation and the militias clashed in the Ain Zara region in south Tripoli.

To read MAST’s Libyan Country report on MASTOPEDIA, please click here.
Gulf of Guinea

Seven crew members onboard container vessel MSC Talia F have been kidnapped by pirates in the Gulf of Guinea, off the coast of Libreville, Gabon. The 2015-built, 957-teu MSC Talia F, carrying 17 seafarers, is believed to have been en-route from Lome, Togo to Port Libreville, Gabon at the time of the pirates’ boarding.

Incidents:
1. Underway Madeira (Portugal)-flagged container ship reported attacked and boarded at 0727 UTC in position 00:33N – 008:25E, around 62nm West of Libreville, Gabon. Unauthorised persons boarded vessel and kidnapped seven of 17 crew before escaping. Ship resumed sailing towards Libreville at around 1115 UTC. Reported (MDAT/Source) 22nd Mar.

Navy deploys 6 warships, two helicopters to protect oil installations
The Nigerian Navy on Sunday 22nd deployed six of its warships and two helicopters to protect key critical oil facilities at sea. It was gathered that the move was to prevent sea robbers from taking advantage of the spread of Coronavirus to attack key installations. The six warships along with other sister agencies embarked on the operation tagged ‘Treasure Guard 11’ targeted at putting a stop to activities of pirates and crude oil thieves operating around the country’s territorial waters.

Court Jails 11 Oil Thieves in Lagos to One Year Each
The Economic and Financial Crimes, EFCC, Lagos Zonal office, today, March 19, 2020 secured the conviction of eleven oil thieves alongside their Vessel, MT Jonko, before Justice Rilwan Aikawa of a Federal High Court sitting in Ikeoyi, Lagos. Justice Aikawa found them guilty on all three counts and sentenced each one to one year imprisonment on each count.

FG Won’t Shut Vessels Out Of Seaports Over Coronavirus Outbreak – NPA
The Nigerian Ports Authority (NPA) said on March 21st that it won’t restrict vessels from coming into Nigerian ports in the wake of the deadly coronavirus (Convid-19) ravaging the world. He said: “Shutting of Seaports? Not for now.” When asked whether the country will restrict vessels from hard hit countries from calling at Nigerian seaports, he said, “Not to the best of my knowledge.”

Navy Captures 4 Oil Thieves With 204 Drums Of Diesel
Four oil thieves have been captured by officers and personnel of the Nigerian Navy with 204 drums of diesel, which was being smuggled to Cameroon. The naval team intercepted the thieves while they were on their way to neighbouring Cameroon. The suspects include: Okon Asuquo Okon, Unwana Etim Nkereuwem, Ndudu Bassey Entom and Victor Etim Effiok.

To see MAST Services in the region, please click here. And to read Nigeria’s country report, please click here.
South East Asia

The Philippine Navy (PN) is providing ample assets and personnel to aid to its Coast Guard counterparts, ensuring that there would be unauthorized water travel while the 30-day enhanced community quarantine in Luzon is in effect, an official said on Sunday 22nd. In a statement, PN public affairs office chief Lt. Commander Maria Christina Roxas said the Navy has deployed four naval craft and its crew along with two rigid-hull inflatable boats with personnel in Sangley Point, Cavite City.

Incidents:
1. Late report: Anchored Singapore-flagged container ship duty AB on forecastle deck alerted the bridge when he discovered an unknown person trying to open the bolt of portside hawse pipe gate at 2010 LT in position 03:55.50N - 098:46.30E, Belawan Anchorage, Indonesia. Perpetrator wearing facemask and armed with a metallic object. Duty officer immediately sounded the whistle. Perpetrator fled the scene and escaped through a hawse pipe into a waiting unlit wooden boat. A second perpetrator was spotted jumping into the water from the anchor chain. A ship security search was conducted. No damage to the ship’s property and nothing was stolen. Incident reported to the local authority. Reported (ReCAAP) 13th Mar.

2 suspects in abduction of teacher in Sulu arrested
Police and military authorities arrested, Saturday (21st) night two members of the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) who were considered principal suspects in the kidnapping of a public elementary school teacher in this city last year. Police Regional Office for Zamboanga Peninsula (PRO-9) Director Police Brig Gen Froilan F. Quidilla identified the alleged ASG members as Erma Sahibol, alias Emz, and Kimar Juram, alias Monica.

Chinese port container volumes decline 10.6% in Jan-Feb this year
China’s Ministry of Transport released port throughput figures for the period of Jan-Feb this year, showing a decline several major ports, especially in terms of container volumes. Due to the COVID-19 outbreak Chinese ports have faced severe challenges and a decline of the cargo throughput since the beginning of this year. After successful prevention and control of the outbreak, China has been promoting the work and production resumption from March, however, the increasing imported infection is another risk for transportation sector.

China launches new facilities in West PH Sea
Two research stations were recently launched on two of China’s large man-made islands in the West Philippine Sea — Kagitingan (Fiery Cross) and Zamora (Subi) Reef, Chinese news agency Xinhua reported on March 20th. The research facilities, which are under the Integrated Research Center for Islands and Reefs of the Chinese Academy Sciences (CAS), feature a number of labs on ecology, geology and environments, the report said.

Cargo vessel’s passengers not allowed to disembark in Surigao del Sur
All crew and passengers of a foreign cargo vessel were prevented from disembarking in the town of Carrascal in the province of Surigao del Sur on March 20th due to the coronavirus disease (Covid-19) threat. The municipalities of Carrascal and Cantilan, through a joint executive order (EO), said they will not allow the crewmen to leave the vessel, M/V Lucy Ocean 2002, even if the ship has a clearance from the Bureau of Quarantine.

CMV Pulls Off Passenger Transfer Between Ships At Sea
Cruise & Maritime Voyages (CMV) saw two of its ships, the Columbus and Vasco da Gama, meet some 12 nautical miles off the coast of Phuket, Thailand to undertake a unique passenger transfer and repatriation operation involving 239 passengers. Despite representations and last-ditch mercy pleas to the Thai Authorities, the Port of Phuket remained closed to cruise ships along with all other ports in Southeast Asia and the wider Indian sub-continent rendering an air repatriation not an option, the company said.

To see MAST’s services in the region, please click here.
Central and South America

Nothing significant to report.

Incidents: Nothing significant to report.

Standing advice:
The repercussions of a vessel being caught acting as a mule with drugs stowed will depend on the type, amount and national laws, but may be disruptive and costly. When and if operating in these areas, especially Columbia and Peru, it is advised that:
• Potential stowage areas such as rudder shafts are denied as far as possible, and/or routinely searched.
• Access points are closely monitored by a vigilant watch for the duration of the vessel’s call at port.
Severe Weather Warnings

Warnings detailed on this page are from the World Meteorological Organisation (WMO) and are issued by respective Regional Specialised Metrological Centres, Tropical Cyclone Centres or National Meteorological Services. For further information on severe weather warnings please click here.

Nothing significant to report.