

Fishing off the coast of Somalia: a high-risk business (03/05/2008)

The crisis unleashed by the hijack of a Spanish tuna boat in international waters near the coast of Somalia shows the level of international maritime insecurity, the serious situation that country is going through and the impossibility of resolving this type of issue from the point of view solely of military activity and policing.

The hijack on 20 April of the Playa de Bakio and the kidnap of its crew, consisting of 13 Spanish and 13 African fishermen, led to a military and diplomatic response from the Spanish government, with the sending of several aeroplanes and a frigate which was taking part in exercises in the Red Sea to the Horn of Africa; the establishment of an inter-ministerial crisis cell, and the sending to Mogadishu of the Spanish ambassador to Kenya to begin contacts with the Somali Transitional Federal Government in order to negotiate the freedom of the crew. The Somali coast is one of the most dangerous maritime areas in the world, as shown by the fact that in the past year at least 25 boats have been captured by Somali militias, who have turned these actions into a *modus vivendi* and an important source of income, both for *freelance* militias and for groups with closer links to the political and military blocks confronting one another for control of the country. In the last few days, a Japanese oil tanker has also been attacked, and a French luxury yacht, the Ponant, was assaulted by another militia on 4 April. It was freed after the payment of a ransom amounting to a million dollars. This situation of insecurity is a consequence of the war and the absence of effective authority lasting almost 20 years, which have led to the destruction of the country and the death of more than 300,000 people since 1991, as well as a humanitarian crisis currently affecting more than two million people. The TFG – the result of a peace process in 2004 – barely controls the capital, Mogadishu, and some regions in the south of the country with the support of 8,000 Ethiopian troops. Ethiopia, with the blessing of the United States, invaded Somalia in December 2006 to overthrow the power of the Islamic courts, seen as a threat and the seed of Al-Qaeda on the African continent.

Clearly, as the TFG has a militia of only a few thousand combatants – insufficient from any point of view to establish peace and security in the country – it will not be able to guarantee security in or near its waters. The militias take advantage of this insecurity and lack of control to attack and hijack the boats that come within reach of their powerful launches and communication systems. However, the whole world's fishing fleet also takes advantage of this situation to work in one of the richest fishing grounds. These have not yet been exhausted because of the deterrent effect of the proximity of the war in Somalia and the consequent insecurity of its waters, a situation which eliminates the need to pay to obtain government licences because there is no legitimate contact in Somalia. Although this was not the case with the Playa de Bakio, in other cases Somali territorial waters have been violated for fishing. In addition, many ships travelling from the Persian Gulf towards the Red Sea take advantage in order to clean and empty their tanks in Somali waters, and chemical dumping has also been discovered off the Somali coast by western companies, particularly Italian ones, taking advantage of the situation of chaos, lack of government and war in the African country. It is, therefore, necessary to protect boats travelling through the most dangerous areas in the world, such as the seas off the Malacca peninsula and the Horn of Africa, but it is still more necessary, in the case of Somalia, for the international community to commit itself to resolving the conflict suffered by the country so that the Somalis themselves can be the ones protecting their coasts and recovering sovereignty over their natural resources, including fish. Spain could promote an international deterrent mechanism in the Indian Ocean so that this measure is accompanied by initiatives to reopen dialogue and negotiation between the Somali agents who are, ultimately, those who hold the key to resolving this issue.

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