

Eight Indian crew held by pirates rescued by Somalia's military

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Mogadishu: Somalia's security forces have freed eight Indian crew members who had been held hostage by pirates, an official said Wednesday.

Photo: REPRESENTATIVE IMAGE

The sailors of a ship hijacked last week were rescued after regional forces surrounded their pirate captors in a small village outside Hobyo town, Abdullahi Ahmed Ali, the town's mayor, told The Associated Press.

All the Indian crew members have now been rescued as two had been freed in the ship on Sunday, the mayor said. Ten crew members were taken captive, not 11 as initially announced by officials, he said.

Four pirates were arrested during the operation, he said.

Pirates made the captive crew members walk long distances in the bush for days to avoid troops that were chasing them.

"They are exhausted and hungry because of that long ordeal," the mayor said.

"The eight hostages were freed without fighting. The security forces overwhelmingly besieged them and the pirates tried to flee, but three of them were captured," Abdirashid Mohamed Ahmed, deputy commander of the maritime force in Somalia's Galmudug state said.

The "Al Kausar" ship was stormed by the pirates off the Indian Ocean coast near Yemen on March 31. They held the 10-man crew hostage and made ransom demands.

The ship was transporting cargo including wheat and sugar from Dubai via Yemen to Somalia's Bossaso port.

The vessel was freed by the Somali security forces on Monday. While the two Indian crew members were rescued in the operation, the pirates were able to escape with the rest of the hostages during an exchange of gunfire.

In recent weeks there has been a resurgence of piracy off Somalia's coast after five years of inactivity. The piracy was once a serious threat to the global shipping industry but lessened in recent years after an international effort to patrol near Somalia, whose weak central government has been trying to stabilize the country after 25 years of conflict.

But frustrations have been rising among Somali fishermen, including former pirates, at what they say are foreign ships illegally fishing in local waters.

In March, Somali pirates hijacked the Comoros-flagged oil tanker Aris 13, marking the first such seizure of a large commercial vessel since 2012. They later released the vessel and its Sri Lankan crew without conditions, Somali officials said at the time.

Pirates in late March also seized a fishing trawler, which police warned could be used for further piracy. On Saturday, pirates boarded the Lebanese-registered OS 35 cargo ship but abandoned it the next day before naval forces recovered the ship.

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