

U.S. ship's captain captive but unharmed

by UPI

MOGADISHU, Somalia -- The captain of a U.S.-flagged ship seized off the Somali coast was a captive of pirates but unharmed, a spokesman for the ship line said Thursday.

"The safe return of the captain is our foremost priority," Maersk spokesman Kevin Speers told CNN.

Maersk Alabama Capt. Richard Phillips "remains a hostage but is unharmed" and was being held on a lifeboat near the cargo ship, Speers said.

Pirates who hijacked the vessel Wednesday backed out of an agreement to exchange Phillips for a pirate captured by crew members attempting to retake the ship, Maersk Alabama's second officer Ken Quinn said.

The rest of the crew was in good shape, Quinn said.

During a news conference, Speers said the U.S. Navy "is in command of the situation."

Company officials are in contact with the Alabama and the ship was at a "safe distance as instructed by the Navy," Speers said. "We are coordinating with the Navy and all the governmental organizations involved in this crisis."

The destroyer USS Bainbridge, part of the allied fleet patrolling the waters off Somalia, is on the scene.

The hijackers boarded the Maersk Alabama, which was carrying humanitarian aid for African countries, several hundred miles off the Somali coast.

The 17,000-ton vessel is the first U.S. ship to be seized in the latest wave of piracy, CNN reported.

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