Rescue just step No. 1

by The San Diego Union-Tribune

For too long, the international response to the steady escalation in piracy in a 1 million-square-mile swath of the northwest Indian Ocean has been either dismissive or unfocused.

The reasons for this are many. Some governments have struggled to take ocean piracy â€” seen as a 19th-century phenomenon â€” seriously. Others have concluded shipping companies should be able to deal with the Somalian gangs behind the piracy surge, whether by continuing to make payoffs or by arming the crews on their vessels. In the United States, the Bush administration reportedly hesitated to have the U.S. Navy take an active role in fighting sea piracy both because of concerns about violating international law and because of a belief that U.S. military resources were best used elsewhere.

The result of this collective international dithering has been to encourage more piracy â€” indeed, to turn it into Somalia's most lucrative enterprise, generating as much as $150 million in ransom payments from shipping firms and their insurers in 2008. An estimated 260 hostages from 14 ships are now being held.

Thankfully, Richard Phillips, captain of the U.S.-flagged Maersk Alabama cargo ship, is no longer one of them. Phillips' rescue, courtesy of the Navy snipers who killed his captors, was wonderful news.

But it also likely marks the onset of a bloody new era. President Barack Obama vowed this week to lead an international campaign against the pirates. Meanwhile, pirate leaders â€” reacting to the recent deaths of their men at the hands of French as well as U.S. forces â€” vowed retaliation, and a Somali Islamic terrorist group that reportedly cooperates with the pirates claimed to have fired mortars at a plane carrying Rep. Donald Payne, D-N.J. If Obama is serious about targeting piracy, such tension is likely to be the norm for many months to come.

For now, the best option appears to be a coordinated, NATO-centered effort to interdict ships and ascertain their crews' intentions after the ships leave Somali ports and enter international waters. It has promise to squelch new piracy and makes much more sense than a commitment to patrol 1 million square miles of ocean.

But it does nothing to help the 260 hostages already held by pirates - hostages who are almost certain to bear the brunt of pirates' anger over international attempts to suppress their lucrative schemes. The international community must do all it can to save the lives of these hostages â€” without encouraging (or tolerating through inaction) new hostage-taking.

This is an enormous challenge, but one that must be undertaken. It's time for ocean piracy to be relegated

once again to the history books.

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