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Seychelles President: Don't Manage the Piracy Problem, Solve It



A EU NAVFOR taskforce vessel sinks a skiff off the coast of Somalia.

Interview with H.E. James Michel, President of the Republic of Seychelles

06:39 GMT, January 23, 2012 defpro.com | Only a few countries are exposed, to a similar extent, to the effects of Somali piracy as is the Republic of Seychelles. Located at the southern edge of the pirates' main area of operation in the Indian Ocean, and dependent upon safe sea lanes, the island country finds itself in the front line of a difficult struggle against the criminal fruit of a destabilised and war-ravaged neighbourhood at the Horn of Africa.

Nicolas von Kospoth of defpro.com asked His Excellency James Michel, President of the Republic of Seychelles, to portray the country's considerable efforts to ward off this threat and to promote the Seychelles as an anti-piracy hub for its international allies. Read below the President's statements on economic, social and political effects of piracy on the Seychelles and his hope for a more determined and effective approach to solve the problem by the international community.

defpro.com: ***Even as we make this interview, many captured commercial vessels remain anchored in the ports of Somali pirates and scores of captives desperately hope to be released. Mr. President, how do you assess the current development of the Somali piracy issue?***

James Michel: Piracy has developed into a lucrative business model and therefore more emphasis needs to be made to target the financiers of piracy, to eliminate the criminal networks and bring to justice the main profiteers of this business.

We can fill our prisons to the brim with the Somali pirates who are at sea, but they are not the instigators, they are not earning even a drop of the vast amounts of money from the ransoms, so our efforts to capture them will not be efficient, in the overall picture, if we do not capture those who profit the most from this criminal activity.

We are in the process of setting up a Regional Anti-Piracy Prosecution and Intelligence Centre, with the support of the International Maritime Organisation (IMO) and the UK and its Serious Organised Crime Agency, that will coordinate the tracking of financial transactions and enforcement operations. This will, in turn, assist law enforcement agencies to build cases needed to issue international arrest warrants and prosecute the financiers of piracy.

Piracy is rooted in the instability in Somalia, and that is why I have appealed to world leaders to consider taking more action in Somalia itself, in order to implement a comprehensive approach to the instability there. This is summarised in these key areas:

- 1) Increased commitment and support to peacekeeping forces within Somalia, particular to the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) forces operating in Mogadishu, as well as a maritime presence for the mission that will enable the patrolling of the coast;
- 2) Targeted interventions against all criminal and terrorist groups to displace hubs of criminal activities;
- 3) Reinforcing and strengthening existing areas of stability within Somalia, with the establishment of rule of law in these areas and creation of economic opportunities as a key part of the effort;
- 4) Strengthening the capacity of coastal states to better defend the maritime zones, allowing for improved patrolling and surveillance capabilities;
- 5) And the improvement of intelligence sharing networks that will allow for a more efficient and systematic approach in targeting all angles of the criminal network, with particular attention to the financiers of piracy.

defpro.com: ***Due to their geographic location, the Seychelles are an important ally to those countries who are engaged in the fight against piracy off the Horn of Africa. Further, the country is itself affected by this unfortunate phenomenon. How would you describe the Government's role in this complex situation?***

James Michel: Seychelles has taken a lead in the region to highlight the scourge of piracy and has been seeking the assistance of the international community, since it is apparent that piracy is a global issue and not just a regional one.

We are committed to coordinating international efforts and seek greater participation by all countries in terms of assets, resources and to highlight the adverse effects for small island states such as Seychelles. We have also been at the forefront of prosecuting pirates by framing new anti-piracy laws and formulating partnerships with Somali authorities for the transfer of convicted pirates. We have taken these initiatives despite the tremendous strain on our limited resources.

For this reason, I have placed an emphasis on Seychelles becoming the anti-piracy hub for our international allies, who are committed to the fight against piracy. It is important to note that the anti-piracy action off the Horn of Somalia, as well as the wider Indian Ocean, has been the largest and first international operation of its kind, where the navies of the major world's powers – the US, Russia, China, India, and EU nations – are all working together to combat this security threat.

defpro.com: How are the Seychelles security and defence forces positioned for the fight against piracy, and to what extent does the country rely on international co-operation to enhance current and future capabilities in this regard?

James Michel: Our concern for sovereignty is vital and that is why we are committed to protecting our maritime territory, as well as our fishermen, by all available means.

The Seychelles Coast Guard has been continuously deploying its ships and boats for surveillance, along with regular patrols being undertaken by the Twin Otter from the SPDF Air wing. Since February 2011 we have also had an Indian Dornier aircraft based at Mahé for assistance in surveillance efforts.

At the beginning of 2011 the United Arab Emirates donated two patrol boats and three fast boats to the Seychelles Coast Guard to add to its fleet of two patrol ships, the Topaz and the Andromache, which were donated by the Government of India some years ago. The UAE also donated and constructed a new Seychelles Coast Guard base last year. In 2011, the Government of China also donated two Y-12 aircraft for surveillance missions. The EUNAVFOR has also assisted us with their own aerial surveillance mission, with a Luxembourg maritime patrol and reconnaissance aircraft, as well as the French E-3F aircraft based in Seychelles. Further, the US Air Force has unmanned aerial vehicles stationed in Seychelles for anti-piracy surveillance missions.

But considering the size of our Exclusive Economic Zone of 1.3 million square kilometres, these are still not enough. We need more assets for aerial surveillance missions, as well as maritime patrols, and we are seeking greater assistance from the international community in this regard.

We have already shown the effectiveness of our Coast Guard, which has undertaken three successful rescue operations at sea where Seychellois and other national hostages were liberated from their captors and the pirates responsible were arrested and prosecuted (involving the following pirated vessels: Faith, Galate and Gloria).

We have also established a national security support system for Seychelles-based vessels, whereby armed protection teams are deployed. But some types of vessels are very hard to defend because of their small size. This is why we must continue to try and target the root causes of the problem: the instability in Somalia and the criminal financiers of piracy. We must solve the problem and not just manage it.

defpro.com: ***Estimates of the annual costs of piracy to the international community range from \$7 to \$12 billion. Could you please outline to our readers exactly how the Seychelles are being affected by piracy in terms of financial, political and social effects?***

James Michel: Seychelles, being a small maritime state, has been adversely affected by piracy. Piracy is costing Seychelles an average of 4 per cent of its GDP* every year, which includes direct and indirect costs as well as losses in shipping, fishing, tourism and increased spending on maritime security.

Particularly hard hit are the local fisheries, where between 2008 and 2010 there was a drop of 46 per cent in local fishing, which is, coincidentally, also the equivalent of the rise in the price of fish on the local market during the same period. Our local fishermen, whose livelihood depends on the sea, have been the victims of piracy on several occasions and some have been taken hostage to Somalia and suffered terribly. Presently, two of our brothers, fishermen in their sixties, are being held hostage in Somalia. Since we are a very close-knit community with a small population, these events have been very traumatic, and many families and their friends have suffered.

Tourism has not been impacted overall in terms of visitor arrivals. Indeed, we had two record years consecutively, but the yachting tourism has seen a sharp drop, as yachts are not allowed to sail far from the main islands.

Also affected are local consumer prices for imported goods, which have increased due to the high costs of imports (and insurance premiums as well as risk factors), thereby affecting the Seychelles economy and cost of living.

We are a maritime nation – the sea-lanes are the highways that connect us to the world. Piracy increases our sense of isolation.

defpro.com: ***You have repeatedly raised the issue of piracy in different multi-national forums, for instance during the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in Perth in October 2011. What impression do you have of the international community's willingness to take action against piracy?***

James Michel: I was encouraged at the CHOGM in Perth by the willingness of Commonwealth leaders to address the issue of piracy, but in practice it is clear that the efforts of the international community are not adequate. Piracy is still rampant, despite the presence of ships and aircraft operating under EUNAVFOR, CMF, NATO and other independent navies.

Rules of engagement established by different forces are too often limited and do not allow robust responses. Regretfully, once hostages are taken, too many companies and governments are perpetuating piracy as a business transaction.

We need to tackle the root of the problem in Somalia more directly, as well as those financing this criminal activity.

defpro.com: ***Would you say that the political and legal framework within which multi-national fleets, such as EUNAVFOR or the Combined Task Force 151, are currently operating provides sufficient hold and flexibility to effectively tackle piracy?***

James Michel: Considerable efforts have been put in by the multinational forces, and while there have been improvements in the coordination and effectiveness of multi-national operations, the results have not been commensurate. We are still at the management stage of the problem, and not at the stage of solutions.

We need to have a standard political and legal framework to combat piracy, as well as prosecute and convict pirates expeditiously in order to demonstrate an active deterrence to this menace.

While many potential attacks by pirates have been thwarted by the forces deployed, there have been numerous cases of pirates being set free because of a lack of evidence or non-acceptance by any country to prosecute them. This clearly permits them to return for another attack.

We need to, therefore, adopt new strategies and policies in dealing with piracy in order to always be one step ahead of them.

defpro.com: ***In mid-November, a German frigate captured a pirate mother ship with 19 pirates. As no country was willing to take charge of the criminal prosecution, the naval vessel brought the pirates back to Somalia where they are now free to launch new attacks. How can the international community overcome its current incapacity to address the problem?***

James Michel: There needs to be consensus by the international community on the global nature of the problems of piracy and the need to share the burden of prosecution and conviction. As we have seen, the range of operations of the pirates has steadily increased over the last few years and it is imperative that all countries contribute their resources. Much more needs to be done by the international community regarding sharing the burden of prosecution.

Seychelles is one country that has successfully prosecuted pirates, but we are a small country that can only do so much. Already over 12 per cent of our prison population is made up of Somali pirates.

We commend those countries that have also proceeded with prosecutions. We also look forward to having fully functioning and internationally monitored prisons within Somalia so that we may transfer convicted pirates to serve their sentences there.

defpro.com: ***There are increasing numbers of reports about ship crews or hired security teams fighting back attempts to board their ship. This indicates a growing intensity of violence on both sides. How do you assess this trend and will it be possible to counter piracy without escalating the spiral of violence?***

James Michel: As you are aware, no ship with an armed security team onboard has been pirated to date. While the safety of the crew is paramount, the growing menace of piracy has forced ship owners to adopt other means of protection at the risk of escalating violence.

We must remember that to take a ship hostage is an act of violence, and that these pirates are brandishing sophisticated weapons that are aimed to kill.

The response to these attacks, therefore, needs to be met with force as the pirates are not interested in dialogue. Failure to act with force results in months of imprisonment in poor conditions in Somalia.

defpro.com: ***You have warned in the past of the connections between piracy and terrorism in Somalia. Could you please elaborate on your views of this***

calamitous relation and the trends that you observed during recent years?

James Michel: Somalia has several paramilitary groups, and many agencies operating in Somalia have reported that payments are made to these groups by pirates – either as a form of tax or as part of an organised relationship. Some of these groups use terrorist tactics and have conducted attacks in Uganda and in Somalia, itself.

Various experts, on numerous occasions, have linked piracy to radical Islamist groups in Somalia. Furthermore, we have seen the growing level of violence adopted by the pirates, including the abuse of hostages. The kidnapping and killing of tourists in the Lamu resort of Kenya has been a worrying new phenomenon regarding the situation in Somalia. Thus, there is a very thin line between piracy and terrorism today.

It is therefore very important that all regional and international stakeholders cooperate closely to try stopping this from spreading, as both piracy and terrorism have no borders.

defpro.com: ***In this context, how do you assess the Kenyan military offensive and its effects on the region?***

James Michel: The hijacking and killing of tourists in a resort in Kenya is totally unacceptable and a heinous and needless crime. The perpetrators need to be brought to justice. It is every country's right to protect its sovereignty and citizens.

defpro.com: ***During the visit by Chinese Minister for National Defence and State councillor General Liang Guanglie in December 2011, you signed an agreement with China to develop closer cooperation in the fight against piracy. Could you please outline the exact aims of this agreement and what is your assessment of the Seychelles' partnership with China?***

James Michel: We have simply renewed our military cooperation with China. The aim of this agreement, which dates to 2004, is to increase military cooperation and boost the Seychelles' capacities to fight the threat of piracy. We will receive training, equipment and exchange visits from China and will work towards improving our military relations.

We have also invited the Chinese navy to make more frequent port calls for rest and recuperation, and to increase their maritime surveillance in our economic area. Seychelles and China have a special relationship built on mutual respect and cooperation, which has brought about significant developmental gains. ____

