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Maritime Unions' Message to State Department: Don't Reward Indolent Flag States in Piracy Fight

Issue is Matter of Fairness to Taxpayers, Mariners, Responsible Flags

Four American maritime unions have urged the U.S. Department of State not to follow the recommendation of an international shipping group that advocated using UN military guards to fight shipboard piracy.

In a mid-September letter to Donna Leigh Hopkins, Coordinator, Piracy & Maritime Security, U.S. Department of State, Seafarers International Union official David Heindel spelled out the severe pitfalls of a recent proposal by a group known as the Round Table of international shipping associations. Heindel serves as SIU secretary-treasurer as well as chair of the Seafarers' Section of the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF). He wrote on behalf of the SIU and three other U.S. unions: the American Maritime Officers (AMO); Masters, Mates and Pilots (MM&P); and Marine Engineers' Beneficial Association (MEBA).

After pointing out that many members of those respective unions sail in pirate-infested waters near Somalia and farther out in the Indian Ocean, Heindel observed that the Round Table recently asked the United Nations to establish a "UN Force of Armed Military Guards" for deployment aboard merchant ships.

"We oppose the use of UN forces in this fight because, quite simply, it rewards flag-of-convenience states that make no effort to protect crews working on vessels flying their flags," Heindel wrote. "In particular, most if not all of the so-called flag-of-convenience or runaway flags have either made woefully inadequate attempts to combat piracy, or they've made none at all. The burden of dealing with pirates is being borne by the seafarers themselves, ship operators and a few nations – including the United States – and the task of actually prosecuting pirates by even fewer. The failure of flag-of-convenience states to exercise their jurisdiction against pirates who have attacked vessels flying their flag is totally unacceptable by the world's seafarers and should be by those that employ and regulate us."

He continued, "In that light, the Round Table's proposal amounts to saddling American taxpayers with paying to protect the flag-of-convenience scheme. Put another way, their proposal equates to having others pay to fight piracy while the absent flag states rake in profits from much of the world's fleet without meeting any of the obligations as a proper flag state. In our opinion, their failure to act thus far has contributed to the death of more than sixty seafarers. ..."

Finally, Heindel noted that the aforementioned unions as well as the ITF support many of the concerns expressed by the Round Table. "However, they missed the mark on this proposal."

For information on flags of convenience, visit <http://www.itfglobal.org/flags-convenience/index.cfm>

For information on international efforts to combat piracy, visit <http://www.saveourseafarers.com/>

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