



February 16, 2010

The Honorable Hillary Rodham Clinton
Secretary
United States Department of State
2201 C Street, NW
Washington, DC 20520

The Honorable Robert M. Gates
Secretary
United States Department of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, DC 20301

The Honorable Ray H. LaHood
Secretary
United States Department of Transportation
1200 New Jersey Avenue, SE
Washington, DC 20590

Dear Secretaries Clinton, Gates and LaHood:

On behalf of the American merchant mariners our organizations represent we respectfully ask that you work with us to develop and implement the programs and policies necessary to protect U.S.-flag vessels and their United States citizen crews from acts of piracy. Despite efforts over the past 10 months, American mariners face an ongoing threat. As American crews simply attempt to do their jobs they must remain vigilant, never knowing exactly when these international criminals will initiate illegal and perhaps deadly action against U.S.-flag ships. As evidenced by the frequent incidents against ships from various nations in the Gulf of Aden and in other waters near Somalia, it is no exaggeration to state that mariners' lives are in constant peril.

Our organizations continue to work with American shipowners and government agencies to ensure mariners have the training they need to help repel pirate attacks. However, these non-lethal measures alone are not enough as piracy becomes more sophisticated and deadly. American crews need and deserve to have their government standing shoulder to shoulder with them to combat this ongoing threat.

A STRONG UNITED STATES MERCHANT MARINE IS VITAL TO OUR NATIONAL DEFENSE AND ECONOMY.



We agree that international patrols in high-risk waters, international conferences and meetings – including those of the United Nations' CGPCS (Contact Group on Piracy off the Coast of Somalia) - and international aid efforts can all help bring attention to the problem and may ultimately lead to long-term solutions. However, until there is an effective international response in place the United States Government should act forcefully to protect U.S.-flag vessels and their American citizen crews. For example, our government should continue to work with U.S.-flag vessel operators and American maritime labor representatives to put in place the most practical and effective deterrents against acts of piracy against U.S.-flag vessels. Second, it is extremely important that our government be prepared to respond, as it did so effectively during the situation involving the MAERSK ALABAMA, with speed and force each time a U.S.-flag ship is attacked and the vessel and its American crew are taken hostage.

We further believe that our government should not consider after-the-fact legal actions against U.S.-flag shipowners who, as a last resort, pay a ransom to secure the safe release of their American citizen crews as the best solution to the problem of piracy. It would be unconscionable for the United States government to turn its back on or to dictate that American shipowners turn their backs on the American merchant mariners who willingly sailed into harm's way in service to their country. We are proud that throughout our history American merchant mariners have served with distinction as our nation's fourth arm of defense. America's merchant mariners never have and never will shirk their responsibility to deliver the goods whenever and wherever needed. For this reason, we do not subscribe to an international call for mariners to boycott the waters most at risk to attack by pirates. Rather, we believe that just as land-based criminals know they will face strong and swift retribution when they attack innocent victims, we believe seaborne pirates should know they will be treated no differently.

A plan to repel and fight piracy must be as forceful and as unrelenting as piracy itself. We suggested immediately following the attacks against the MAERSK ALABAMA and LIBERTY SUN last year that the most effective step that can be taken in response to aggressive action against U.S.-flag ships and their American crews is for our government to provide U.S.-flag vessels with the on-board armed force protection necessary to repel acts of piracy. We remain convinced that this approach still represents the most effective course of action that can be taken. Nonetheless, we appreciate and strongly support the recent decision by the Department of Defense to assist U.S.-flag vessel operators in contracting with private security forces for U.S.-flag vessels carrying military cargo in high risk waters. We ask that all agencies of the Federal government immediately follow the Defense

Department's lead so that all U.S.-flag vessels transporting military as well as non-military government cargoes receive the same type of support.

In conclusion, we thank the Administration for its efforts and support for the U.S.-flag merchant marine and for America's merchant mariners. As representatives of America's maritime labor organizations we remain ready and willing to continue working with the Administration to bring an end to piracy, once and for all. This only can happen if the United States and other affected nations apprehend, prosecute and hold accountable the pirates for their criminal acts.

Sincerely,

Thomas Bethel
President
American Maritime Officers

Timothy Brown
President
International Organization of Masters, Mates
& Pilots

Don Keefe
President
Marine Engineers' Beneficial
Association

Gunnar Lundeberg
President
Sailors' Union of the Pacific

Anthony Poplawski
President
Marine Firemen's Union

Michael Sacco
President
Seafarers International Union