



Protecting Pakistani Seafarers from Piracy: Strengthening Pakistan's National Response

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The rescue of the tanker MT *Honour 25* off Puntland should not be viewed merely as another episode in the renewed battle against Somali piracy. It is, above all, a painful reminder that behind every hijacked ship are human beings—sailors who can spend months in captivity, separated from their families, deprived of adequate food and medical care and living every day with the fear that a ransom dispute or rescue attempt could cost them their lives.

For Pakistan, the tragedy is particularly poignant. 10 of the 17 crew members aboard the Palau-flagged tanker were Pakistani nationals. When Puntland security forces finally regained control of the vessel on September 29, five crew members had been killed, including three Pakistanis, while four others were injured. Sixteen suspected pirates were reportedly detained.²

The incident raises a difficult question: what more can Pakistan do to protect its seafarers when they work thousands of kilometers from home, often aboard vessels that are not even Pakistani-flagged?

The Sailor is the Forgotten Victim

The public image of piracy is usually that of armed men boarding a ship, taking control of the bridge and demanding ransom. The human dimension is easily lost. For a sailor, however, piracy means something very different. It can mean being forced at gunpoint to lie on the deck. It can mean months without knowing whether one's family has been informed of one's condition. It can mean inadequate food, water and medical attention. It can mean psychological torture and the constant possibility of violence.

The International Maritime Organization (IMO) reported in July that 44 seafarers were being held captive aboard three vessels in the region, including MT *Honour 25*.³ By August, the IMO warned that more than 90 seafarers were being held captive as the number of piracy incidents in the Gulf of Aden increased.

The resurgence is significant because Somali piracy had been largely suppressed for more than a decade. The Royal United Services Institute notes that only three commercial vessels had been hijacked off the Horn of

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² Reuters, "Somali Pirates Killed 5 Crew Members of Hijacked Tanker before Rescue Mission, Puntland Says," Reuters, September 29, 2026, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/somali-pirates-killed-5-crew-members-hijacked-tanker-before-rescue-mission-2026-09-29/>

³ International Maritime Organization, "IMO Secretary-General Calls for Urgent Release of 44 Seafarers Held by Pirates," July 6, 2026, <https://www.imo.org/en/mediacentre/pressbriefings/pages/imo-secretary-general-calls-for-urgent-release-of-44-seafarers-held-by-pirates.aspx>

Africa between 2012 and the beginning of 2026, whereas six commercial vessels had been seized since late April this year.⁴

The International Maritime Bureau, meanwhile, recorded 38 piracy and armed-robbery incidents worldwide in the first half of 2026. Although this was the lowest first-half figure since 1992, Somali pirates accounted for 94 percent of crew taken hostage, demonstrating that a relatively small number of attacks can still produce an enormous humanitarian cost.⁵ The message is clear: *low numbers of attacks do not mean low risk for the people aboard the ships.*

The MT Honour 25 tragedy

MT Honour 25 was hijacked on April 21, 2026, off Puntland. Its 17-member multinational crew included 10 Pakistanis. The vessel remained in pirate hands for more than five months. The ordeal eventually ended in a military operation by Puntland forces. But the rescue became a tragedy when the pirates reportedly opened fire on the hostages as they came under pressure. Three Pakistani sailors, one Indian and one Myanmar national were killed, while four others were wounded.⁶

The incident also demonstrates the danger inherent in any hostage-rescue operation. A military assault may liberate a vessel, but when armed criminals are holding innocent people at gunpoint, there is always a danger that they may use the hostages as human shields or retaliate against them when cornered. That is why *prevention is infinitely preferable to rescue.*

Pakistan Cannot Leave the Matter to Shipowners

A common response is that the responsibility lies primarily with the shipowner, the flag state and the coastal state. Legally and

operationally, there is considerable truth in this. But that cannot be the end of the argument when Pakistani citizens are involved.

Pakistan is a major supplier of maritime manpower to the international shipping industry. Pakistani sailors serve on ships registered under numerous foreign flags. Consequently, Pakistan's responsibility for its seafarers does not end at Karachi port.

The Government Shipping Office already has important responsibilities concerning Pakistani seafarers, including maintaining seafarer records, supervising engagement and discharge, settling certain employment disputes and ensuring arrangements for distressed seafarers and repatriation.⁷

The challenge is to transform these existing administrative arrangements into a comprehensive overseas seafarer-security system.

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What Pakistan Can Do

1. Create a Seafarer Emergency Response Cell

Pakistan should establish a permanent National Seafarer Emergency Response Cell, perhaps under the Ministry of Maritime Affairs with participation from the Foreign Office, DG Ports & Shipping, Pakistan Navy, Pakistan Maritime Security Agency and the Government Shipping Office.

Its purpose should be simple: when a Pakistani sailor is kidnapped, injured, missing or stranded anywhere in the world, there should be one government mechanism responsible for coordinating the response.

⁴ Christopher Hockey, "Somali Piracy in 2026 Is Not Just a Resurgence of a Past Problem," Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), September 23, 2026, <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/somali-piracy-2026-not-just-resurgence-past-problem>

⁵ International Chamber of Commerce, "Maritime Piracy Incidents Fall to Lowest since 1992, but Risk Remains," ICC UAE, 2026, <https://iccuae.ae/maritime-piracy-incidents-fall-to-lowest-since-1992-but-risk-remains/>

⁶ Abbas Naqvi, "Somali Pirates Kill Three Pakistanis during Rescue Operation," The Express Tribune, September 29, 2026, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2632091/somali-pirates-kill-three-pakistanis-during-rescue-operation>

⁷ Government Shipping Office, Pakistan, "Functions," Government Shipping Office, accessed October 1, 2026, <https://shippingoffice.gov.pk/functions.aspx>

The cell should maintain a 24-hour emergency contact, a database of Pakistani seafarers serving internationally and pre-arranged protocols with Pakistani missions abroad.

Families should not have to demonstrate in the streets to discover what has happened to their loved ones.

The distress experienced by families of the MT *Honour 25* crew—some of whom protested publicly in Karachi after months without satisfactory progress—shows why a formal mechanism is necessary.⁸

2. Establish a Maritime Security Risk Register

Every Pakistani seafarer recruited for a foreign vessel should receive information about the security environment of the vessel's intended route.

If a ship is scheduled to transit the Gulf of Aden, western Indian Ocean, Red Sea or another high-risk area, the sailor should know the risks before signing on.

Pakistan should require licensed manning agencies recruiting Pakistani nationals to disclose:

- vessel flag and ownership;
- planned route;
- previous piracy incidents involving the vessel;
- security arrangements;
- whether BMP maritime-security procedures are implemented;
- availability of citadel and communications facilities; and
- insurance and compensation arrangements in the event of piracy.

The IMO itself has urged ship-owners and operators to conduct thorough risk assessments and implement the industry's Best Management Practices for Maritime Security.⁹

3. Make Anti-Piracy Training Mandatory

Basic seamanship is not enough when a sailor is entering a high-risk maritime zone. Pakistan should introduce compulsory anti-piracy and hostage-survival training for seafarers deployed on designated high-risk routes.

This should include:

- recognizing suspicious approaches;
- emergency communications;
- evasive maneuvering;
- use of protected spaces or citadels;
- dealing with armed boarders;
- maintaining discipline during captivity;
- psychological preparation;
- first aid and trauma response; and
- conduct during a rescue operation.

The objective should not be to turn sailors into combatants. Their survival often depends precisely on not confronting heavily armed pirates.

4. Strengthen Maritime Intelligence Sharing

Pakistan should become more deeply integrated into the information-sharing architecture of the Djibouti Code of Conduct/Jeddah Amendment. The IMO framework specifically emphasizes information sharing, maritime domain awareness, interdiction, prosecution and the proper care and repatriation of victims.¹⁰

⁸ Shazia Hasan, "Karachi Police Briefly Detain Protesting Family Members of Pakistani Sailors Held Hostage by Somali Pirates," Dawn, September 7, 2026, <https://www.dawn.com/news/2028109>

⁹ International Maritime Organization, "IMO Secretary-General Calls for Urgent Release of 44 Seafarers Held by Pirates," July 6, 2026, <https://www.imo.org/en/mediacentre/pressbriefings/pages/imo-secretary-general-calls-for-urgent-release-of-44-seafarers-held-by-pirates.aspx>

¹⁰ International Maritime Organization, "Maritime Security," International Maritime Organization, accessed October 1, 2026, <https://www.imo.org/en/mediacentre/hottopics/pages/piracy-default.aspx>

Pakistan could establish a dedicated maritime-security liaison mechanism linking: Pakistan Navy → PMSA → DG Ports & Shipping → Foreign Office → shipping companies → international maritime information centers. The purpose would be to ensure that a warning received by one institution reaches every Pakistani ship and sailor that may be affected.

5. Negotiate With Major Flag States

The MT *Honour 25* was Palau-flagged, illustrating an important problem: a Pakistani sailor may be employed on a foreign ship whose government has primary responsibilities as the flag state. Pakistan therefore needs agreements with countries whose vessels commonly employ Pakistani crews.

Such agreements could provide for:

- notification of piracy incidents;
- immediate consular access;
- sharing of crew manifests;
- emergency medical evacuation;
- repatriation;
- compensation;
- family liaison; and
- coordinated hostage negotiations.

This would convert Pakistan's relationship with foreign flag states from an ad hoc diplomatic interaction into an institutional arrangement.

6. Financially Protect The Sailor During Captivity

A sailor kidnapped by pirates should not discover that captivity has also destroyed his family's financial security.

Pakistan's implementation of the Maritime Labor Convention 2006 provides an important foundation. The convention

entered into force for Pakistani-flagged ships in March 2026, with protections covering employment, welfare, medical care and social security.¹¹

Importantly, MLC provisions provide for continuation of wages and other entitlements during captivity resulting from piracy or armed robbery until release and repatriation, or in the case of death, until the applicable date.¹²

Pakistan should ensure that equivalent contractual protections are incorporated into agreements governing Pakistani sailors working on foreign-flagged vessels.

7. Establish a Seafarer Hostage and Family Support Fund

The Government could establish a modest Seafarer Hostage Assistance Fund, financed through government allocation, maritime-sector contributions and possibly an industry levy.

Its purpose would not necessarily be to pay ransom. Rather, it could provide immediate assistance for:

- family subsistence;
- medical treatment;
- legal assistance;
- psychological counselling;
- emergency travel;
- repatriation;
- funeral expenses; and
- rehabilitation of released hostages.

The distinction is important: supporting the victim is not the same thing as rewarding the pirate.

8. Improve The Diplomatic Response

Once a Pakistani sailor is kidnapped, time becomes critical.

¹⁰ Emmanuel Macron, "80th Session of the United Nations General Assembly in New York: Opening Day," *Élysée*, September 22, 2025, <https://www.elysee.fr/en/emmanuel-macron/2025/09/22/80th-session-of-the-united-nations-general-assembly-in-new-york-opening-day>

¹¹ Emmanuel Macron, "81e session de l'Assemblée générale des Nations unies à New York : deuxième journée," *Élysée*, September 22, 2026, <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2026/09/22/81-session-de-lassemblee-generale-des-nations-unies-a-new-york-deuxieme-journee>

¹² Emmanuel Macron, "Situation internationale : réunion avec les chefs des partis," *Élysée*, September 18, 2026, <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2026/09/18/situation-internationale-reunion-avec-les-chefs-des-partis>

Pakistan's diplomatic missions in the region should have pre-approved procedures for dealing with hostage situations. The government should maintain direct communication channels with Somalia, Puntland authorities, Oman, Djibouti, Kenya, Saudi Arabia and other regional states that possess maritime-security capabilities.

Pakistan also has considerable experience in naval diplomacy and maritime security. That experience can be used to develop a network of relationships before the next crisis occurs.

Pakistan Navy: From Escort Capability to Preventive Diplomacy

Pakistan need not—and probably cannot—provide naval escorts for every ship carrying Pakistani sailors. But it can contribute selectively to international maritime-security arrangements. The objective should be maritime presence, information and coordination, rather than attempting to militarize every commercial vessel. Where the threat level warrants it, Pakistani naval assets participating in international maritime-security operations could establish liaison with merchant vessels carrying significant numbers of Pakistani nationals. Pakistan could also offer anti-piracy training and capacity-building assistance to regional coastal states through established multilateral mechanisms.

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The Larger Lesson

The MT *Honour* 25 tragedy occurred against a complicated maritime-security backdrop. The Gulf of Aden and Red Sea

are already affected by conflict and attacks on commercial shipping. The IMO warned in August that piracy had returned to the Gulf of Aden and called for sustained international naval cooperation.¹³ Analysts have also pointed to the diversion of naval resources elsewhere in the region as one factor contributing to the changing security environment.¹⁴

The international community therefore faces a familiar problem: piracy flourishes when maritime security gaps appear. But there is an important difference between a ship and a sailor.

A ship can be repaired. Cargo can be replaced. Insurance can compensate for financial loss.

A Murdered Sailor Cannot Be Replaced

The deaths aboard MT *Honour* 25 should therefore not be reduced to another statistic in the annual piracy report. They should prompt Pakistan to reconsider how it protects the thousands of its citizens who earn their livelihoods at sea.

The country needs a policy that begins not with the question, “Who owns the ship?” but with another question: “Who is responsible for the Pakistani sailor?” The answer should be: Pakistan, wherever that sailor may be.

That does not mean promising that every sailor can be protected from every danger. It means ensuring that Pakistani seafarers receive advance warning, proper training, reliable communications, diplomatic protection, financial safeguards and—when disaster strikes—a government response that is immediate, coordinated and humane.

The sea may be borderless, our responsibility to our sailors should not be.

¹³ International Maritime Organization, “IMO Calls for Urgent Action as Piracy Resumes in the Gulf of Aden,” August 24, 2026, <https://www.imo.org/en/mediacentre/pressbriefings/pages/imo-calls-for-action-on-piracy-following-recent-attacks.aspx>

¹⁴ Christopher Hocky, “Somali Piracy in 2026 Is Not Just a Resurgence of a Past Problem,” Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), September 23, 2026, <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/somali-piracy-2026-not-just-resurgence-past-problem>.

