

The Jolly Roger Still Flies

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But today's pirates have better weapons than the cutlass

A pair of sluggish old fishing boats were placidly trawling off the southern shore of Thailand on a moonlit night. Suddenly the fishermen spotted two dark silhouettes clipping toward them across the water. Skipper Kimheng Phonsawat, 47, did not wait to identify them. Crouching low over his wheel, he instantly directed both his boats to slash their nets and make for nearby Ko Kut Island at full throttle. "I could tell by the sound that the other boats had 300-h.p. engines," he recalled. "As one of them pulled alongside, we came under rifle fire." Three of Kimheng's crew were killed, but then the attacking craft inexplicably veered off. Kimheng made it safely to port and next morning returned to the area to search for his other boat. The bodies of three drowned sailors were fished out of the gulf. But four other crew members and the trawler had vanished into the still sea.

Few men live to tell tales of the marauding buccaneers who currently infest the sea-lanes of Southeast Asia. Piracy has become an all too real contemporary scourge for fishing and commerce across an expanse of ocean stretching from the Malay peninsula to the Philippines. Sumatran pirates constantly harass coastal freighters and fishermen in the Straits of Malacca. Privateers from Malaysia and Khmer Rouge hijackers from Cambodia prey on Vietnamese refugee boats drifting across the Gulf of Thailand. One Japanese cargo line considers southern Philippine waters so dangerous that it has ordered its ships bound for Indonesia to detour westward into the South China Sea. Pleasure boats headed toward Bali from Hong Kong and Thailand are warned to stay away from the Celebes Sea.

Cutlass and sword are passe. Asian pirates today pounce from hidden coves in supercharged speedboats or trawlers armed with automatic rifles, M-79 grenade launchers and even antitank guns. Their easiest prey is the flotilla of fishing trawlers, ferries and small trading boats that ply the island waters. The booty includes everything from cargoes of fish to duty-free goods being trafficked in a centuries-old barter trade between East Malaysia and the Philippine island of Mindanao. "The greed of the pirates is unbelievable," says a Malaysian official. One ruthless pirate tradition of yore prevails: walking the plank. Of 500 victims attacked by buccaneers off the southern Thai provinces of Trat and Chantaburi last year, more than 300 drowned.

The rise of Southeast Asian piracy is an indirect outgrowth of the war in Indochina. The end of the conflict provided a bonanza of cheap surplus weaponry. At the same time, Thailand's fishing industry, which expanded to replace Viet Nam's war-torn fleet, had to sail farther and farther to meet demand. As seafood prices tripled, a number of fishermen discovered that it was easier and more profitable to hijack fish than to catch them. Since then, piracy has spread and diversified. Some pirates have even tried attacking big ocean-going ships. In the Sulu Sea, two small armed boats closed in on the 4,837-ton Liberian freighter Rio Colorado and blew out its portholes with automatic rifle fire and hand grenades before the ship could get away. A few months ago, a Panamanian freighter ran aground on a Sulu island after pirates shot out navigational beacons in the shallows. Their assault boats swarmed around the marooned transport in such heavy numbers that the Philippine air force had to be called out to drive them away.

Nowhere is piracy more dangerous than in the disputed no man's water off the Thai province of Trat, near the Cambodian border. There, fishing fleets have to contend with

seafaring Khmer Rouge who have turned to a kind of officially sanctioned piracy since the Phnom Penh regime, like a number of other governments, extended its territorial claims 200 miles into the Gulf of Thailand. Ten Thai fishermen were killed in a single attack off Ko Kut Island last month.

Although nervous about a direct confrontation with the Phnom Penh government, Thailand has nevertheless reinforced marine police near Cambodia and promised its fishermen that it would increase marine patrols in Malaysian border waters. Malaysia plans to buy 31 additional patrol boats and four special aircraft for pirate detection. The Philippine government has ordered all barter-trade vessels to use special narrow sea-lanes supervised by the navy.

Few pirates have been caught so far, and authorities fear that it could take years to find most of them. Unlike the days of Captain Kidd, 1978's pirates do not announce themselves. As a frustrated Thai police lieutenant lamented last week after an embarrassing false-alarm search of an innocent trawler, "It would be much easier if they still flew the black flag."

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