

## Danish navy frees hostages from pirates off Somalia

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COPENHAGEN, April 12 (Reuters) - The Danish navy captured 16 Somali pirates and freed 12 captives when it intercepted a "mothership" vessel off the Horn of Africa, it said on Thursday.

The Danish warship Absalon, serving in NATO's counter-piracy mission Ocean Shield, stopped the vessel off the east coast of Somalia on Wednesday, boarded it without resistance, arrested the suspected Somali pirates and found the hostages.

"The operation was carried out without use of armed force," the Danish navy command said in a statement.

"As the Absalon approached the ship and hailed it, they surrendered right away," navy spokesman Mikael Bill said.

Held by the pirates were three Iranians and nine Pakistani hostages, the original crew of the vessel, a Jelbut-type fishing boat seized by pirates about a month ago, Bill said.

The navy calls such a boat a "pirate mothership" because it is big enough to operate on the high seas and serve as a support vessel, carrying equipment for pirates who tend to use small skiffs to approach and board ships.

The hostages were on their way home on Thursday after giving testimony, but the suspected pirates will remain held aboard the Absalon until Denmark determines if it can hand the pirates over to a country in the region for prosecution, Bill said.

It was the second time in just month-and-a-half that the Absalon arrested pirates and freed hostages off Somalia.

At the end of February, the Danish navy ship opened fire on a suspected pirate vessel which disobeyed orders to stop, killing two hostages but freeing 16 others and capturing 17 suspected pirates.

Piracy is rife off the Horn of Africa, disrupting important shipping lanes between Europe and Asia, putting seamen, vessels and cargoes at risk, and costing shipping companies huge sums to protect themselves.

It has been a huge problem as pirates from lawless, poverty-stricken Somalia seek ransoms to release ships and hostages.

Although anti-piracy operations have succeeded in reducing the numbers of vessels and hostages taken in the past few years, efforts to stamp out piracy are hampered by the unwillingness of many countries to prosecute captured pirates in their courts.

The problem of finding courts to try pirates stems partly from a lack of a functioning judicial system and prisons in Somalia, but also reluctance by other countries to receive captured pirates.

Most European countries, including Denmark, have been unwilling to bring suspects from east Africa to their jails and courts, which means navies engaged in anti-piracy missions often must release captured pirates without prosecution. (Reporting by [John Acher](#); Editing by Jon Hemming)