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At the Mercy of Somali Pirates

Hansa Stavanger Crew Describe Hostage Ordeal

By SPIEGEL Staff

Somali pirates released the German freighter Hansa Stavanger last week after a four-month hostage crisis marked by gunfire, drugs and an unpredictable pirate commander. Now crew members have described their ordeal in the hands of the khat-addled pirates.

When ships that have been taken hostage by pirates and later freed enter the port of the Kenyan coastal city of Mombasa, they are usually accompanied by sharks. The battered freighters have often spent months at anchor off the coast of one of the pirate havens north of Mombasa, in neighboring Somalia.

And when ships lie at anchor for so long, mussels, crustaceans and algae grow on the underside of their hulls. This attracts small fish, followed by larger fish that eat the small fish and, finally, sharks that eat the large fish. When a ship that has been detained for a prolonged period of time is eventually released, the large numbers of mussels attached to its hull slow its progress, allowing an entire food chain to follow behind, with sharks bringing up the rear.

There must have been plenty of sharks swimming around in Mombasa harbor last weekend. After spending [four months in the hands of Somali pirates](#), the German container ship *Hansa Stavanger* crawled its way to Mombasa at a mere five to 10 knots, according to the captain's log.

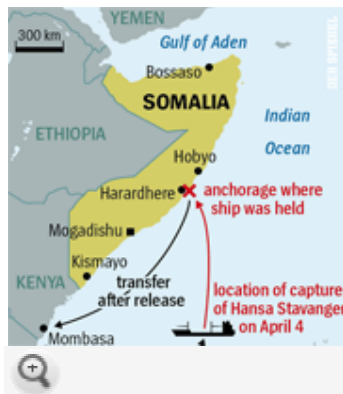
The crew consisted of 24 men, including five Germans. Now that they are free, the men are describing their lives as the pirates' hostages, telling stories of fear and terror, mock executions and gunshots on deck, of the agony of spending months hoping for the best, and of the relief they felt when they spotted parachutes carrying the millions in ransom money falling from the sky.

German security experts, on the other hand, are not as relieved. This time, the government's crisis task force in Berlin had not intended to simply pay the ransom. In fact, this time German authorities hoped to use force to gain the ship's release. Under the initial plan, Germany's [elite GSG-9 police unit was to storm the ship](#) in one of the biggest secret operations in postwar German history. However that plan failed. Then the plan was to get navy frogmen to attack the pirates. But the pirates got away too quickly, and the marines were left to attend to the hostages.

Under Stress

The fiasco began with a dot that appeared on the *Hansa Stavanger's* radar screen on April 4, at approximately 9 a.m. A tiny boat was approaching the ship head-on. It was still four nautical miles away, but it was traveling at high speed. Seeing such a small boat 400 miles away from the mainland, Frederik Euskirchen knew right away that the men in the craft were not out fishing.

Euskirchen, the second officer on the *Hansa Stavanger*, was working on the bridge at the time. He is only 26, but he has a cool head despite his youth. Euskirchen received his training at the marine college in Elsfleth in northern Germany, which has one of the best nautical programs worldwide. All he needs to work as a captain is another year-and-a-half of experience on board a ship. He certainly has the nerves for the job. He would later say, in an understatement worthy of the British, that one can certainly feel "under stress" when being shot at by gangsters.



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Map: Route of the Hansa Stavanger

As the boat approached, the men on the bridge immediately called the captain. Krzysztof Kotiuk, 62, a German seaman of Polish extraction, was sitting in his cabin doing the monthly accounts. He hurried to the bridge.

The *Hansa Stavanger* veered sharply to the side and reversed course, its two-stroke diesel engine operating at full power, just as planned. But even at its top speed of 17 knots, the freighter was too slow to outrun the pirate boat. "We tried to get away. But it was impossible," the captain would later say. "Their boat was so fast that they caught up with us within 20 minutes."

There were only five gaunt figures squatting in the boat, their traditional Somali clothing fluttering in the wind. They began shooting immediately. The bullets from their Kalashnikovs whipped across the deck, followed by the hiss of rocket-propelled grenades. A grenade hit the captain's cabin, and a fire broke out, which it took the crew six hours to extinguish.

The pirates quickly gained control over the ship when Kotiuk's officers decided not to do anything heroic and stopped making risky, evasive maneuvers. The pirates calmly climbed on board.

High but Friendly

None of the Somalis spoke English. They were the attackers, the ones who were best at climbing and shooting; the brains of the operation would arrive later. Nevertheless, using their hands and feet, the nautical maps on the bridge and a piece of paper, the pirates quickly made it clear to the officers where they wanted the ship to go: to Harardhere, one of the three most notorious pirate hideouts on Somalia's east coast.

When the freighter was later anchored near Harardhere, small motorboats shuttled back and forth between the beach and the ship, bringing reinforcements. According to Kotiuk, "there were always 10 to 12 people on the bridge, and about six people on the deck. There were also guards posted on the deck." The captain estimates that about 30 heavily armed pirates were on the ship at any given time to guard their prize.

Everything seemed tolerable at first. On April 6, the captain used the ship's satellite telephone to send the following message to his wife Bozena in Munich: "We have been kidnapped. The kidnappers are high, but friendly. Don't worry, we're waiting for the ransom."

The pirates rounded up the sailors at night. The Europeans were locked up in the heavily guarded bridge, while the sailors from the Philippines and the Polynesian island nation of Tuvalu were placed in a room in the hold. The pirates slept in the cabins. They also stole all the sailors' belongings.

The pirates established contact with the Hamburg shipping company, Leonhardt & Blumberg. Piracy is an old business in Somalia, and there are established practices for what began next -- the negotiations over the ransom money.

European Jackpot

Few people are more familiar with the way this works than Kenyan Andrew Mwangura, a diminutive, soft-spoken former sailor. In 1996, Mwangura founded the Seafarers' Assistance Programme in Mombasa, a network of contacts in African ports designed to help seamen.

In recent years, Mwangura has become something of a middleman between pirate clans and the shipping industry. Everyone contacts him when a ship disappears: the shipping company, the insurance staff, the security firms and the sailors' families. He tests the waters, sets up contacts and collects information. He has also been directly involved in some negotiations.

Mwangura is also familiar with the people in charge of the pirates, who move the bulk of the money to Kenya and Dubai, where they invest it, in real estate among other things. There are no opportunities to invest millions in Somalia. It was professionals who hijacked the *Hansa Stavanger*, says Mwangura.

They initiated the first round in this game of pirates' poker. Much was at stake: human lives, a large sum of money and the question of how much ought to be paid for what types of human lives.

Many pirates use spies to assess the total value of their takings. Somalis in the city where the shipping company is headquartered investigate the company to determine how large and wealthy it is. Other Somalis in local ports estimate the value of the cargo. The value of the ship itself depends on two factors: size and age. There are also straightforward guidelines for

determining the value of the people on board. "Black sailors are worth little, but Europeans and Americans are the jackpot," says Mwangura.

A Kenyan sailor of the lowest rank earns about \$200 (€140) a month. To determine the crew's ransom value, the pirates ask the men on board where they come from. If a captain makes \$5,000 a month, he is worth 25 Kenyan sailors.

Naturally, the pirates began the negotiation by asking for outlandish sums. In the case of the *Hansa Stavanger*, their initial demand was for \$15 million.

Frank Leonhardt, one of the owners of the shipping company, had hired the Armor Group, a British security firm, to handle the negotiations. The middleman countered the pirates' demand with an offer of \$600,000. The haggling had begun, and it would drag on for months.

With 50 men locked in a steel box in the sweltering heat, with nothing to do, the mood on board became increasingly tense. Above deck, the pirates began shooting into the air. "They told us they were testing their weapons," Euskirchen would later report. The deck was soon littered with large numbers of bullet casings and unexploded shells.

The pirates ransacked the ship. They broke open one of the containers and found bundles of old clothing bound for Africa. Soon many of the pirates were walking around in second-hand European clothes.

According to Kotiuk and Euskirchen, the pirates apparently failed to notice that something was brewing over the horizon. The crisis team in Berlin had mobilized 200 members of the GSG-9 elite police unit, which had brought along helicopters and speedboats. The men were now on board a borrowed American helicopter carrier, the *USS Boxer*, waiting for orders to deploy. A state-of-the-art German submarine had also been requested.

A senior official at the German Interior Ministry, who was involved in the planning, would later say that there were two scenarios. Under Plan A, the submarine was to take the men to the container ship, where they would exit the submarine through the torpedo tubes, wearing diving gear, climb up the side of the freighter and then overpower the pirates. The tried and tested method had the advantage of causing little noise and being relatively safe for the GSG-9 men involved.

Under Plan B, however, the GSG-9 men would be brought in by helicopter and lower themselves onto the ship's deck using ropes. Helicopters are loud, and the pirates could have shot down one of the helicopters with their bazookas or killed the hostages. Plan B was clearly the riskier approach.

But Plan A failed to materialize, because the submarine was still too far away, and so it remained where it was docked, at a port on the Mediterranean island of Crete. That left Plan B. Officials at German federal police headquarters in Potsdam, outside Berlin, were opposed to the idea. So were the Americans, who were unwilling to offer up the *USS Boxer* for what could turn out to be a suicide mission.

Keeping a Clear Head

Meanwhile, the pirates on board the *Hansa Stavanger* learned of the nearby naval buildup from the BBC, which they always listened to. When they were in a good mood, they would

tell the crew about what was happening in the world -- that Michael Jackson had died, for example. But by now their good moods were rare.

The pirates replaced their original negotiator with someone who spoke no English. This made their dealings with the shipping company's negotiators complicated, but at least the numbers were clear. The pirates were now demanding \$3 million. Leonhardt offered \$2.3 million. The pirates soon replaced their second negotiator with someone else.

The Bundeskriminalamt (BKA), Germany's federal police force, began complaining about Leonhardt to members of the crisis team. They felt that he was too rigid, and that the lives of the hostages were in danger.

The pirates took four of the seamen on land for a short period of time, including Euskirchen and Christopher Schütt, a 19-year-old apprentice. Perhaps they wanted to intimidate the men, or perhaps the pirates simply wanted to prevent potential liberators from freeing all the hostages at once. "In that sort of situation, you have to make sure you keep a clear head," says Euskirchen.

He and the other crew members tried to read the pirates' facial expressions. The chief negotiator, says Euskirchen, called himself "Mr. China." According to Euskirchen, the man was "small and plump" and "became as agitated as Rumpelstiltskin when he didn't get what he wanted."

Two Sacks of Khat a Day

The pirates became more and more violent. On two occasions, says Kotiuk, they pretended that there were going to shoot him, dragging him on deck and holding a pistol to his head. The savage game lasted 20 minutes. When it ended, says Kotiuk, "I was soaking wet."

The weapons were all loaded, and the pirates chewed the leaves of the khat plant, which contains a stimulant, all day long. The motorboats brought two large sacks of khat to the ship every day.

Once, an American helicopter circled the *Hansa Stavanger*, says Kotiuk. The pirates herded the hostages together along the ship's side and barricaded themselves behind them. "They used us as human shields," says the captain. Once under cover, the pirates began firing at the Americans, and the helicopter left.

Food became scarce on board. The pirates brought more food from land, including live goats that were slaughtered on deck almost daily. The sailors fished to supplement their diet. Meanwhile, the vegetation and crustaceans kept on growing underneath the ship. At one point a shark became caught on one of the sailors' fishhooks.

The supply of drinking water was also running low, because the ship's desalination plant was shut down while the ship was at anchor. The ship's engineers took apart the air-conditioning system and modified the condenser so that the condensation water could be captured and used as drinking water.

Poor Quality Negotiating Partners

Meanwhile, ship owner Leonhardt had increased his offer to \$2.5 million. It looked like a deal was in sight. But then, Mr. China suddenly increased his demands, arguing that the costs had gone up, now that the ordeal had already been going on for three months. "The quality of our negotiating partners left much to be desired," Leonhardt says today. "We had just reached an agreement when suddenly it was no longer worth the paper it was written on."

Leonhardt also felt it was his duty to drive a hard bargain, even if the crew was suffering and he was insured. "Piracy off the coast of Somalia is an absolute success story. Ransoms have gone up substantially within a year. Where is this going to end?"

Meanwhile, the crisis team in Berlin was making preparations for a new attack on the pirates - to be launched immediately following delivery of the ransom money. This time elite German Navy frogmen were to carry out the mission.

More than two dozen members of the unit were waiting on board the *Rheinland-Pfalz*, a frigate that had long been keeping watch out of sight of the *Hansa Stavanger*. But the Navy men needed time to position their helicopters between the pirate boats and the mainland.

On July 27, the crisis team received the news that the pirates and the shipping company had agreed on a \$2.75 million ransom. The British security firm was to take the money to Harardhere.

Free at Last

On Monday of last week, Kotiuk and Euskirchen saw a two-engine Cessna approaching the *Hansa Stavanger*. After circling the ship a few times, the plane descended and a plastic bag attached to a parachute floated down to the water. The Cessna returned a second time to drop a second bag.

Over the horizon, the helicopters carrying the frogmen were ready to take off.

The pirates flipped through a few of the thick green bundles of dollars, but then they simply counted the packets and divided them up. Toward evening, the pirates, traveling back and forth on two boats, began bringing men and weapons to the shore. The Navy helicopters, still out of sight, took off to begin their mission.

For Captain Kotiuk and Second Officer Euskirchen, it seemed an eternity before the last pirate climbed overboard. But for the naval officers, things were suddenly going much too fast. The *Hansa Stavanger* was too close to land, and the helicopters were unable to apprehend the pirates. The Germans paid, but they didn't shoot. The *Rheinland-Pfalz* and, later, the frigate *Brandenburg*, escorted the container freighter to Mombasa, traveling at a leisurely pace with sharks in its wake.

BKA specialists were waiting for the *Hansa Stavanger*. Their task was to secure evidence for an investigation to be conducted by the Hamburg public prosecutor's office. But how exactly does one investigate and prosecute someone like "Mr. China," whose real name and age are unknown, a man living somewhere in the chaos of Somalia's never-ending civil war?

In September, when the five-month monsoon ends along the coast, the stormy southwesterly wind will subside and the sea will be calm again. Calm conditions are good news for the pirates in their small boats, allowing the next hunting season to begin.

And a few months after that, the sharks will probably be swimming in Mombasa harbour once again.

MATTHIAS GEBAUER, CLEMENS HÖGES, GUNTHER LATSCH, MARCEL
ROSENBACH, HOLGER STARK, ALEXANDER SZANDAR, ANDREAS ULRICH

Translated from the German by Christopher Sultan