

Escalating piracy has roots in fishing encroachment

Catholic News Service | May. 26, 2009

NEW ORLEANS -- The rampant piracy in the Gulf of Aden off Somalia's coast has its roots in the encroachment into fishing zones by large fishing vessels from other countries, says a priest who has a ministry to seafarers.

According to Fr. Sinclair Oubre, president of the Apostleship of the Sea USA, port chaplains first began hearing reports of piracy in the Gulf of Aden five to seven years ago. Those disputes mostly involved encroachment on fishing territories, but "because no big Western ships were getting hit, it was no big deal," he said.

He said he didn't want to excuse the escalating violence launched by pirates against oceangoing vessels, but "it's good that we are finally paying attention to it."

European fishing ships went to the coast of Somalia and secured "either very advantageous fishing rights or else there was basically no one able to enforce the fishing zones," Oubre said. "Basically those boats began exploiting the area. At the root of the piracy is the Somali fishermen attacking those boats to defend their area."

Those disputes escalated to the point where the attacks were staged and coordinated by Somali warlords, "the same warlords that the U.S. Marines and Army fought back in the 1990s," Oubre said.

But this "Robin Hood" motivation "does not justify the piracy," he added.

The pirates have kidnapped ships' crews and demanded ransom for their release, calling themselves modern-day Robin Hoods trying to get compensation to replace a dwindling livelihood as fishermen.

Oubre is a priest of the Beaumont, Texas, diocese. He spoke May 8 at the annual convention the Apostleship of the Sea ministers. About 40 port chaplains and priests involved in ministry on cruise ships attended.

Oubre, a seafarer himself, cobble together vacation time to spend three weeks to a month on the seas.

Seafarers endure "hardship and difficulties and dirty work" and are largely unappreciated, he said. "But there's also the wonders of being blessed by watching the sun come up each day and the glory of the heavens at the end of the day. To watch the flying fish and the porpoises dance as we plow through the water is a blessing."

On the Web

Apostleship of the Sea USA

www.aos-usa.org