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## New Houthi tactics put seafarers on edge

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The Houthis have ratcheted up the fear factor for seafarers heading to the Middle East – as well as families at home – with their latest video showcasing how they managed to deploy boats packed with explosives to take out the Greek-controlled *Tutor* kamsarmax last week, a first-of-its-kind attack in the Houthis' seven-month campaign against merchant shipping, and one that killed one seafarer and led to the sinking of the Evalend Shipping bulk carrier.

In the video issued by the Houthis, the *Tutor's* stern is attacked by one small vessel, and then the middle of the ship suffers another large explosion from a separate projectile. Separate videos from onboard show armed security guards watching from the bridge as the explosive-packed vessel heads towards its target.

The *Tutor* is the second ship to have been sunk by the Houthis, following on from the *Rubymar* in early March. The fate of another ship attacked by the militant group last week, the *Verbena*, a general cargo ship, remains unknown. It suffered a severe blaze and was abandoned on Saturday.

Fourteen of the world's largest shipping associations issued a release yesterday, asking for help from states with influence in the region.

"This is an unacceptable situation, and these attacks must stop now," the release stated, adding: "We call for States with influence in the region to safeguard our innocent seafarers and for the swift de-escalation of the situation in the Red Sea."

Speaking with *Splash* last week, Steven Jones, the founder of the Seafarers Happiness Index, said: "This latest Red Sea security deterioration points not only to Houthi strength but rising aggression too. This is deeply concerning. As ever, seafarers bear the brunt – with each attack, fear rises almost exponentially on the vessels around." Jones said it was also important to focus not just on the immediate vicinity of attacks, but away back in the homes of seafarers.

"Concern from family, with pressure to return home, means that such threats to shipping have a far deeper and longer impact from a recruitment and retention perspective than the initial explosion," Jones said.

Writing for *Splash* earlier this year, Charles Watkins, CEO of Mental Health Support Solutions, described a vessel visit where he supported crew whose vessel was attacked by rockets through the Red Sea.

"One particular aspect of this ordeal was that many crewmembers understandably expressed a reluctance to travel back through those dangerous waters. The fear instilled by the attack was so profound that there was a general consensus among the crew that they would sign off rather than face the risk again," Watkins wrote.

The 2020s are proving to be a very hard period to entice people to work at sea. Starting with the pandemic, which forced many thousands of seafarers to work in

taxing conditions for far longer than agreed contracts, crews have also had to face rising cases of piracy, wars in the Black and Red Seas with many also being sent to work on the so-called dark tanker fleet where safety standards have been in the spotlight in recent years.

Officer supply shortage has hit an all-time high and is unlikely to improve, resulting in manning cost inflation, according to a recent study published by shipping consultants Drewry.

Drewry said the 2023 officer availability gap had widened to a deficit equating to about 9% of the global pool, up from 2022's 5% shortfall and the highest level since it first started analysing the seafarer market 18 years ago.

The consultancy forecasts similar deficit levels through to 2028 based on the limits of new seafarer supply becoming available.

"While these deficit levels are based on vessel numbers together with assumptions on crewing levels and so largely theoretical, they clearly indicate that the seafarer labour market has become particularly tight, with important implications for recruitment and retention as well as manning costs," Drewry noted.