

Seafarers bear brunt of 'rising aggression' from the Houthis

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It's been a brutal week for the mental welfare of seafarers bound for the Middle East and their families back home, starting with hopes for a ceasefire in Gaza, before swiftly descending into an explosive, bloody chaos with one death and a severe injury as the Houthis ramped up more sophisticated attacks.

The Houthis have displayed greater sophistication in their attacks on merchant shipping this week, hitting targets both by sea and air for the first time.

Their first successful sea drone strike on a commercial ship, Evalend Shipping's *Tudor* kamsarmax, sustained damage and water ingress in the engine room on Wednesday with reports emerging that one seafarer died in the attack. Another attack on Thursday on the *Verbena*, a general cargo ship owned by Ukraine-based Donbasstransitservice, saw three projectiles hit the ship, creating a severe blaze onboard with nearby US military personnel medevacing one seriously injured seafarer to hospital.

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The week has also seen other strikes come close to vessels passing through the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden with *Splash* estimates suggesting more than 110 merchant vessels have now been targeted by the Houthis since their campaign in support of Hamas started last November.

The Houthis have said they will continue their campaign until Israel pulls out of Gaza. A proposed ceasefire plan between Hamas and Israel – which was endorsed by the United Nations Security Council on Monday night – has not progressed as seafarers would have wished this week.

“This continued reckless behaviour by the Iranian-backed Houthis threatens regional stability and endangers the lives of mariners across the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden,” read a statement from US Central Command yesterday. “The Houthis claim to be acting on behalf of Palestinians in Gaza and yet they are targeting and threatening the lives of third-country nationals who have nothing to do with the conflict in Gaza.”

Speaking with *Splash* today, 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. We talk of crew mental health and wellbeing, but imagine for a moment the feeling of terror of sailing through such a war zone. Current efforts are falling short, while missiles and drones keep landing, and change has to come.”

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.

In a statement given to *Splash*, bulker owners’ association Intercargo condemned ‘in the strongest terms’ deliberately targeting ‘innocent civilian seafarers and ships peacefully sailing through international waters’.

“We demand that all involved parties cease their deliberate and targeted attacks on innocent seafarers with immediate effect. In addition, we urge all states to further enhance maritime security in this region. Intercargo reminds the world that seafarers and global shipping kept the world fed and warm during the pandemic, irrespective of politics. It is the world’s moral duty to protect seafarers,” the association said in an emailed statement.