

WHAT IF OBAMA SENT SEAL TEAM 6 AFTER ONLINE PIRATES?

Let me start by saying that Jessica Buchanan, the American aid worker rescued with her Danish colleague from pirates last night by SEAL Team 6 in Somalia, sounds like a selfless woman; I'm happy for her and her family she is now safe.

But the rescue got me thinking about our country's efforts to combat two types of pirates: those who exploit lawless areas around the globe to kidnap ships or people for ransom, and those who exploit international boundaries to evade copyright laws. So I wanted to look more closely at what went on here. I'm not sure either approach we're using works (and I'm quite certain that SOPA would be worse), but I am interested in taking a step back and thinking about piracy in general.

First, the details. Here is Defense Secretary Panetta's statement. President Obama released this statement on the raid.

On Monday, I authorized an operation to rescue Jessica Buchanan, an American citizen who was kidnapped and held against her will for three months in Somalia. Thanks to the extraordinary courage and capabilities of our Special Operations Forces, yesterday Jessica Buchanan was rescued and she is on her way home. As Commander-in-Chief, I could not be prouder of the troops who carried out this mission, and the dedicated professionals who supported their efforts.

Jessica Buchanan was selflessly serving her fellow human beings when she was taken hostage by criminals and pirates who showed no regard for her health and well-being. Last night I spoke with Jessica Buchanan's father and told him

that all Americans have Jessica in our thoughts and prayers, and give thanks that she will soon be reunited with her family. The United States will not tolerate the abduction of our people, and will spare no effort to secure the safety of our citizens and to bring their captors to justice. This is yet another message to the world that the United States of America will stand strongly against any threats to our people.

Buchanan and her colleague are just 2 of 150 western hostages held by groups described as Somali pirates

Obama said we would not tolerate the abduction of our people, but Buchanan has been in custody since October 25.

And this operation freed just two of 150 hostages currently held by groups described as Somali pirates. Hostages include Indian, South Korean, Filipino, and Danish sailors, as well as a British tourist and two Spanish medics kidnapped in Kenya. These hostages, of course, remain in custody.

Then there's the American freelance journalist taken hostage Saturday from the same area, Galkayo, from where Buchanan was kidnapped last October.

Several local leaders in Galkayo had just returned from trying to secure the release of another American, a freelance journalist who was kidnapped last week in Galkayo. He remains in captivity in Hobyo, a pirate den on the Somali coast, because the pirates holding him refuse to let him go without a hefty ransom.

I would suggest his presence raises questions about what the ultimate goal for the raid was. Was it just Buchanan's rescue, or the journalist's, too?

Reuters quotes a local leader, currently negotiating for the release of the journalist, as saying that 12 helicopters remain on the ground.

“About 12 U.S. helicopters are now at Galkayo. We thank the United States. Pirates have spoilt the whole region’s peace and ethics. They are mafia,” Mohamed Ahmed Alim, leader of the Galmudug region, told Reuters.

He was speaking from Hobyo, a pirate base north of Haradheere, where he said he was negotiating the release of an American journalist seized on Saturday, also from Galkayo.

And while reports say the US first started talking about the Buchanan rescue “the week of January 16,” after they got new intelligence about her medical condition (possibly a kidney infection), the first videoconference on it took place the same day the journalist was kidnapped (which happens to be the last day of “the week of January 16.” The Buchanan rescue was approved two days later.

Will this discredit the role of the pirates in the community?

Then there’s the question of whether this raid will decrease the risks of piracy in this area of Somalia, which has been used of late as a base of diplomatic and humanitarian aid. I guess the answer partly depends on what those 12 helicopters are doing and for how long.

A number of local Somalis complain about how these pirates—gangs, really—embarrass locals and threaten humanitarian aid workers. In addition, local elders have been calling for the hostages’ release for months, issuing a statement of condemnation in December.

That said, the AP reports that Buchanan and the Danish hostage were ratted out by a Somali colleague of theirs, suggesting that pirates are

doing more than just picking random passers by.

Their Somali colleague was detained by police on suspicion of being involved in their kidnapping.

Which makes me wonder whether this operation is intended to have an intelligence function as well. There are conflicting stories about whether any of the pirates survived. Pentagon spokespeople say none survived.

[George] Little said the initial plans “had very concrete plans for removing the kidnapers and placing them in detention.”

That option, [Captain John] Kirby said, “didn’t present itself.” All nine kidnapers were killed.

But the AP reports that 3 were taken away; CSM reported 5 were. Curiously, in spite of American denials of taking captives, a “western official” admitted we took what captives we did take to our base in Djibouti. So do we now have 3-5 pirates in some jail in Djibouti for questioning?

Will this just intensify the counterreaction?

Again, putting aside the reported 12 helicopters, what response will this rescue elicit?

Of the pieces I read on the raid, only one—the LAT—considered whether this would make things better.

However, Somalia analyst E.J. Hogendoorn of the International Crisis Group said the mission might increase the risks to other Western hostages in Somalia, including the crew of a fishing vessel, Briton Judith Telbut, two Spanish aid workers, two South African yachters and a Frenchman alleged to be an intelligence agent.

“Basically this is a typical kind of reaction-and-counter-reaction situation, where pirates evolve or adapt to the new tactics of Western powers. So it’s unpredictable,” he said.

“I think there will be a propensity to use violence, and the pirates will use more sophisticated securing techniques,” Hogendoorn added. “Just a couple of days ago, pirates reportedly amputated the hand of the captain of a fishing boat to try to force the company to pay a ransom.”

A pirate from the Somali town of Adado, near where the rescue took place, told The Times in a phone interview that pirates would be sure to keep U.S. hostages better secured in the future.

“This teaches us a lesson, and we shall deal with American hostages very strictly and securely,” said the pirate, who gave his name only as Hashi.

“We are not afraid to die, and we will keep defending our waters from invaders,” he said, referring to the Somali kidnappings of sea crews and seizures of their ships for ransom.

Daniel Serwer, Adam’s father and a SAIS professor, asked some of the same questions I’m thinking about.

What remains after the SEALs act? Are the pirates and terrorists really weakened, or do they grow back stronger?

I don’t know the answer to any of this. But the question seems particularly pressing given Obama’s Defense strategy, which foreswears the kind of nation-building that might make this region more stable and allow an alternative economy to flourish.

We rescued one American woman and one other

humanitarian aid worker. Other hostages remain, including an American journalist. Did we make piracy less likely in the future?