

Japan to Open First Foreign Military Base

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DJIBOUTI — Japan is opening its first overseas army base in Djibouti, a small African state strategically located at the southern end of the Red Sea on the Gulf of Aden, to counter rising piracy in the region.

The 40-million-dollar base expected to be completed by early next year will strengthen international efforts to curb hijackings and vessel attacks by hordes of gunmen from the lawless Somalia.

The Djibouti base breaks new ground for Japan, which has had no standing army since World War II and cannot wage war. It however has armed forces — the Japan Self-Defence Forces — which were formed at the end of US occupation in 1952.

“This will be the only Japanese base outside our country and the first in Africa,” Keizo Kitagawa, Japan’s navy force captain and coordinator of the deployment, told AFP recently.

“We are deploying here to fight piracy and for our self-defence. Japan is a maritime nation and the increase in piracy in the Gulf of Aden through which 20,000 vessels sail every year is worrying,” Kitagawa said.

He explained that 10 percent of the Gulf of Aden’s traffic comes from Japan and 90 percent of Japanese exports depend on the crucial sea lane that was almost overrun by the marauding pirates two years ago.

“A camp will be built to house our personnel and material. Currently we are stationed at the American base,” Kitagawa said.

Since 2008, an international flotilla of warships has been patrolling the Gulf of Aden in a bid to stop the hijackings.

“The safety of the seas is therefore essential for Japan... the stability of this region will benefit Japan,” Kitagawa added.

In recent years Somali pirates have attacked or hijacked Japanese vessels traversing the key route.

In 2008, pirates armed with rocket-propelled grenades attacked the Takayama, a 150,000-tonne oil tanker, but it was rescued by the German navy.

The previous year, chemical tanker Golden Nori was captured by the ransom-hunting pirates who freed it six weeks later. In February, the MV Apl Finland was saved by the Turkish navy

from pirates who tried to clamber aboard.

Japan's decision was prompted by pressure from the country's maritime industry.

"We sent military teams to Yemen, Oman, Kenya and Djibouti. In April 2009, we chose Djibouti," Kitagawa said.

The Red Sea state, which is home to the largest overseas French military base and the only US army base in Africa, was picked for its suitable air and sea ports as well as political stability, the official said.

Last April, Japan's defence ministry announced it was sending two destroyers and surveillance planes to boost the anti-piracy mission in the Gulf of Aden.

The presence of the international navies has forced the Somali pirates to venture southwards in the less-patrolled Indian Ocean.

Last weekend they seized three Thai fishing boats with 77 crew some 1,200 miles (2,220 kilometres) from the coast of Somalia, the first time the pirates have struck so far east into the Indian Ocean.

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