

As the world rushed to the aid of earthquake stricken Haiti and large numbers of American ships gathered offshore, there was a notable absentee.

Where was the Royal Navy?

Off chasing pirates in the Gulf of Aden.

The UK is now in such a parlous state that it no longer has enough ships to do two of its basic tasks. The lone frigate it sometimes has in the Caribbean, known as the West Indies guardship, is there to show that the UK's dependancies are under its military wing. And to help protect Britain's streets from drugs coming out of South America.

But now only part time. The ship, an ever-present in days gone by, is now only on station during the hurricane season. That ended before Christmas.

When Britain's destroyer and frigate fleet dropped to 40, this correspondent warned of the dangers. The fleet has been under almost constant attack since then, and is now down to a nominal 25. Observers doubt that even that number is readily available for service.

And those who make a fetish of slashing public expenditure would reduce that number still further.

Contributing yet again to the creation of a third class navy of what was once the best in the world.

UPDATE: 20/01/10

The UK will send Royal Fleet Auxiliary supply ship, RFA Largs Bay, loaded with aid to help with the relief operation in Haiti, International Development Secretary Douglas Alexander has announced today.