GULF OF GUINEA:

TRENDS AND COMMERCIAL IMPACT OF PIRACY ATTACKS

The Gulf of Guinea has once again emerged as the number one global piracy hotspot. In 2019, nearly half of all reported incidents worldwide and 90 percent of all piracy-related kidnappings took place in the waters between Angola and Senegal. EXX Africa unpacks the data and the latest trends.

Situation update: 2019 trends

Global trends

According to the latest data from the International Maritime Bureau (IMB), there were 162 reported incidents of piracy and armed robbery against ships in 2019, compared to 201 incidents reported the year prior - demonstrating a decline in worldwide piracy levels. These incidents comprised four hijacked vessels, 11 vessels fired upon, 17 attempted attacks and 130 vessels boarded.

The total number of incidents recorded per region last year is broken down as follows:
As suggested in the above graph, while there was a decline in the number of reported incidents globally last year, there were also dramatic spikes in activity in certain areas around the world, particularly Africa and its Gulf of Guinea region.

**Gulf of Guinea dominates global piracy**

Out of the 162 incidents reported globally last year, 64 were recorded in the Gulf of Guinea, representing almost 40 percent of the world total. Looking more closely into the type of incidents reported in the region, it is clear that kidnappings, taking crewmembers hostage, hijackings, and firing upon vessels have become the most widely used tactics by perpetrators.

Notably, the incidence of kidnappings in the Gulf has increased dramatically, rising by more than 50 percent from the 78 incidents recorded in 2018 to 121 incidents in 2019. This represents over 90 percent of the global kidnappings reported at sea last year. Incidents were concentrated in Togo (7), Cameroon (31), Benin (35), and Nigeria (48). Ransoms paid for kidnapped crew typically range from USD 18,000 per person to as much as USD 500,000, although most ransoms sit between USD 30,000 and USD 50,000. Occasionally victims die during these attacks. In December 2019, for example, two crew died from illnesses contracted while being held hostage in a remote jungle location.

Beyond kidnappings, taking crewmembers hostage is also common in the Gulf. Last year, 43 such incidents were reported in the region compared to a global 59, indicating that nearly 73 percent of all hostage scenarios took place here. These incidents were reported in Benin (1), Togo (7), Nigeria (12) and Guinea (23).

Moreover, all four vessel hijackings that occurred globally in 2019 and 10 out of the 11 incidents in which vessels were fired upon were also reported in the Gulf. The former occurred in Equatorial Guinea (1), Nigeria (2), and Togo (1) while the latter occurred in São Tomé and Príncipe (1) and Nigeria (10).

The following map shows the distribution of attacks in the Gulf of Guinea in 2019:

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*Source: IMB Piracy Report 2019*
Gulf of Aden/Red Sea/Somalia

In stark contrast to the Gulf, there were zero reported attacks in the Gulf of Aden/Red Sea/off the coast of Somalia last year that could have been attributed to Somali pirates. In 2018, just three incidents were recorded in which three vessels were fired upon. However, while the incidence of attacks has decreased, the IMB notes that Somali pirates continue to possess the capability to carry out attacks.

Who are the perpetrators?

As covered in a previous analysis briefing (See: GULF OF GUINEA: THE THREAT OF PIRACY AND KIDNAP FOR RANSOM TO COMMERCIAL ACTIVITY), attacks are orchestrated by highly, organised and sophisticated land-based criminal groups typically operating in Nigeria with political insurgents occasionally involved.

Reporting has attributed the recent spate in attacks to at least two large piracy groups working in the Gulf. The first group is said to be operating from a so-called ‘Mothership’ to operate deep offshore while another group is exploiting the ambiguous and haphazard patrolling on the outskirts of Nigeria’s Economic Exclusion Zone (EEZ).

The ‘Mothership’ used by the first group further offshore has been identified using global satellite imagery as the Togo-flagged, 3,250 dwt chemical tanker Determination 2 (IMO 8201014). The tanker, for which no ownership, classification or insurance details are available, has been operating without its automatic identification satellite on at all times, thereby masking its location during an attack.

The second pirate group is said to be operating with the 013-built, Nigerian-flagged, 950 dwt product tanker Adeline Jumbo (IMO 9712424). By operating on the margins of the EEZ, these pirates are said to take advantage of ineffective co-ordination between Nigerian patrols and confusion about whether international forces have jurisdiction to respond to incidents.

Mitigation efforts

Over the past year, there have been a number of efforts to combat piracy in the region involving local and international partners.

In this regard, a number of attempts have been made to boost regional capacity and sharing of information, as pirates tend to exploit the boundaries of the territorial waters of the Gulf – a vast region spanning from Angola to Senegal. Where a decade ago, the various countries bordering the Gulf would operate independently in their security operations, through various training exercises typically led by foreign partners, such as the US, these countries are able to come together to coordinate law enforcement strategies.

At the US training exercise known as Obangame Express 2019 last year, for example, more than 33 countries from across the world came together to run
through more than 80 scenarios. The training also registered a number of firsts for the region: Ivorian naval forces incorporated drug-detecting dogs into their operations for the first time, members of the Nigerian navy learnt how to conduct their first visit, board, search and seizure (VBSS) of a simulated non-compliant ship, and Nigeria opened its Maritime Domain Awareness Training Centre, a local training hub open for all West African nations.

In addition to the above, in October 2019, Nigeria hosted the Abuja Global Maritime Security Conference (GMSC) where delegates from various Gulf of Guinea states discussed some of the recent trends affecting maritime security of the region. It was recognised, among other things, that their navies are insufficiently resourced to combat the well-funded and well-equipped pirates; there is a lack of co-operation especially sharing of intelligence between the navies and other authorities of these states; there should be more done to invest in infrastructure, environment, education and job creation in the Niger Delta from where many pirates are believed to emanate; and, there is a need to comprehensively legislate for piracy and associated crimes and cooperate on a regional level including a standardisation of laws. Following the conference, it was not specified how the standardisation of local laws may be achieved and this still remains outstanding at the time of writing.

However, legislative progress was made in Nigeria to allow for the incarceration, prosecution and conviction of pirates. In June 2019, Nigeria passed its first law specifically making piracy a crime and the justice ministry with support from the United Nations set up a special prosecution department focused on the issue. This is an important step in filling a large in gap in tackling piracy, a step that has been advocated for at least a decade.

Despite these measures, it is clear that piracy has continued to flourish in the region. On the one hand, it is argued that new measures need time to take effect. On the other hand, and more realistically, combatting piracy in the Gulf requires a long-term local solution aimed at tackling land-based poverty, corruption and lawlessness – particularly in Nigeria. The involvement of international navies also needs to increase; similar to what was seen in East Africa. However, because the majority of piracy occurs in territorial waters in the Gulf, this is likely to be difficult to enforce. Moreover, it is argued that the shipping lanes in East Africa are of greater importance to the global community than that of West Africa, which has historically warranted a stronger response.

**Commercial impact**

According to research from Oceans Beyond Piracy, the cost of maritime piracy in the Gulf was USD 818.1
million in 2017, up from USD 793.7 million the year before. Nearly a quarter of the total was reportedly spent on maritime security whilst insurance also constituted a large sum as well, with an estimated USD 18.5 million spent on additional war risk area premiums. Thirty-five percent of attacks transiting the area at the time were also deemed to carry additional kidnapping for ransom insurance totalling around USD 20.7 million.

Indicative of the persistent threat to crew, in June 2019, the Indian Directorate General of Shipping issued a restriction banning all Indian seafarers from working on vessels in the Gulf of Guinea. It sent a circular to ship owners and shipping companies in which it noted, “Piracy and armed robbery attacks in the Gulf of Guinea are becoming more violent with a greater tendency to attack, hijack and rob vessels as well as kidnap crew”. More recently, Danish Shipping also issued a statement on piracy in the region, noting that it was “going in the wrong direction”. Further such statements are likely.

For the countries bordering the Gulf, the prevalence of piracy also threatens commercial activity through their ports, which serve as vital lifelines supporting the overall health of their economies. The Port of Cotonou, for example, is of primary importance to economic growth in Benin, where over 80 percent of all goods destined inland transit through it. Yet, the ports of Cotonou in Benin, Douala in Cameroon, Lagos in Nigeria, Pointe Noire in the Republic of Congo, and Lomé in Togo all had three or more attacks within port or at anchorage last year. Any increase in attacks at these sites will impact local trade and ultimately local economies.

**INSIGHT**

The incidence of piracy attacks and specifically kidnappings are expected to continue at the same pace or even rise further in 2020.

Indicative of this, out of the 121 kidnappings reported in the Gulf in 2019, 64 kidnappings occurred across six separate incidents in the last quarter of 2019 alone. In two separate incidents, 19 and 20 crewmembers were taken. Both incidents occurred more than 100NM (185km) from the coast, demonstrating the high capability of piracy groups to orchestrate such attacks.

This general trend suggests that pirates do not have the luxury of time in an attack and are now opting for kidnappings to evade detection from local militaries or even other gangs. This contrasts to the piracy model witnessed in Somalia a few years ago, when hijacked ships and crew were held hostage for long periods off the country’s coast before their release was negotiated and a multi-million dollar ransom paid. As such, pirates are increasingly looking to target larger vessels to abduct a higher number of crew members, for which they can extract ransoms and maximise their returns. The payment of sizeable ransoms further perpetuates the cycle.

Shipping companies operating in this region must continue to follow the measures detailed in Best Management Practices 4 alongside the guidelines issued by the International Chamber of Shipping and its partners. Further, vessels can minimise their risk by, where possible, planning to limit the time spent at anchor or adrift, or doing so much further offshore. Vessel hardening can also prove effective in improving the vessel’s security integrity and preventing boarding. This can include the deployment of barbed wire fencing along the vessel perimeter, the utilisation of a ‘safe room’ for crew to retreat to, and the development of standard radio and emergency procedures in the event of an attack. All necessary insurances should also be in place to mitigate loss for those with commercial interests in shipping, or whose goods are bound from or destined to the region.