GULF OF GUINEA:

THE THREAT OF PIRACY AND KIDNAP FOR RANSOM TO COMMERCIAL ACTIVITY

The Gulf of Guinea has become the world’s largest piracy hotspot since the decline of Somali piracy in the early 2010s, with incidents increasing markedly in the last two years, continuing into early 2019. With the media reporting of new attacks in recent weeks, including kidnappings for ransom, we examine the piracy threat and its trends in the Gulf of Guinea.

Reports in the last few weeks have highlighted the persistent threat of piracy, armed robbery at sea and kidnap-for-ransom in the Gulf of Guinea. Within just the first quarter of 2019, 22 incidents were recorded across the Gulf while the region accounted for all worldwide crew kidnappings with 21 crewmembers kidnapped in five separate incidents. Although the prevalence of piracy may be higher - it is believed that about half of all attacks go unreported - incidents this year have already been recorded in Nigeria, Benin, Cameroon, Ghana, Ivory Coast, Liberia and Togo.

The threat of piracy has been steadily increasing in this region over the past half-decade. Since 2014, there have been approximately 250 actual and attempted attacks in the Gulf of Guinea, according to the
International Maritime Bureau’s Piracy Reporting Centre. However, between 2017 and 2018 alone, the number of attacks increased by more than 70 percent. Nigeria has been and remains the epicentre of this threat. In 2018, 48 incidents were reported in Nigerian waters and between October and December alone, 41 kidnappings were recorded off its coast. Thus far this year, 14 incidents have occurred in the country’s waters – making up over 60 percent of the total reported incidents in the region to date. While this is a slight improvement year-on-year compared to official data collected in 2018, the waters within the Gulf of Guinea, and specifically those off Nigeria, remain some of the most dangerous for vessels and crew. We explore the evolving nature of this threat and the outlook for the year ahead.

**A persistent and evolving threat**

The below map shows piracy and armed robbery incidents that have been reported to the International Maritime Bureau in 2019 to date. The markers show attempted attacks, boardings, incidents in which vessels were fired upon, hijackings, and suspicious vessels. If exact coordinates are not provided, estimated positions are shown based on information provided.

Emerging alongside the rise of commercial oil exploitation in the region, piracy in the Gulf of Guinea has posed a persistent threat since the 1970’s. As global maritime trade expanded from this period onwards, ports became busier and vessels were forced to wait to berth, rendering them vulnerable to opportunist attackers. Small gangs in hollowed-out tree trunks masquerading as fishing vessels carried out these first attacks. Over time, however, these makeshift canoes were fitted with outboard motors to extend their speed and range, before gradually becoming more sophisticated to include the use of advanced technologies and weapons, including speedboats, radio frequency jammers, satellite navigation and a combination of small arms and light weapons.

By the 1990s, attacks shifted from Lagos Anchorage towards the Niger Delta where incidents became more politicised as a result of contestation over the exploitation of oil and the distribution of its rents among the local population. Crimes, such as oil bunkering and kidnapping for ransom, were attributed to groups such as the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) and the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), who would use criminal activities to raise revenues and further political ends by bringing attention to their cause. While an amnesty programme launched in 2009 contributed to an initial decline in incidents, an increase in reprisals were reported from 2016 onwards. Today, it is evident that political insurgents have been co-opted by highly organised, sophisticated criminal groups, with clear involvement by senior politicians and members of the security force. These groups also operate outside of Nigeria, in the waters of neighbouring countries, and the threat of piracy now extends from Senegal all the way along the coast to Angola.

**From steel pipes to RPGs**

As small maritime-focused gangs (such as the Seadogs, the Corsairs and the Vikings), organised criminal groups and political insurgents (such as the
Niger Delta Avengers, Red Scorpions, and the Niger Delta Greenland have melded, it has been difficult to pinpoint the number of groups operating in the region and their respective sizes. In 2012, it was estimated that there were around 1,250 ‘trained’ pirates, but this figure is in itself questionable given that groups employ young men and local fishermen via ‘unions’ on a job-by-job basis depending on the skills needed.

There has been little verifiable evidence subsequently to demonstrate the exact number of pirates operating across the vast number of criminal gangs and militant groups, which are generally accepted to be amorphous.

Piracy in this part of the world is dynamic and comprises theft - varying from petty to sophisticated, where crimes are planned in advance and executed with greater skill, oil bunkering, petro-piracy - often by means of ship-to-ship transfers or attacks on offshore platforms, hijackings, and kidnap for ransom. Attacks also target an increasingly wide variety of ships, including: bulk carriers, container vessels, general cargo vessels, tankers, oil industry support vessels, and fishing vessels.

In the majority of cases, piracy takes the form of petty theft in port or from a vessel at anchor by perpetrators armed with knives or improvised weapons, such as pieces of steel piping. However, in more sophisticated incidents, attackers have boarded vessels well outside territorial waters, up to 100nm offshore, and are armed with assault rifles, machine-guns and rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs), demonstrating the intent to use lethal violence as a tactic when carrying out an attack.

Attacks off Nigeria have become increasingly violent, with pirates making use of multiple attack boats and engaging in shootouts with naval escorts. Kidnappings have also steadily increased over the past two years in which crewmembers are abducted from ships well offshore before being brought back into Nigeria where they are held for ransom. On 29 October 2018, for example, Nigerian pirates in a speedboat hijacked a tanker 100nm off Point Noire, Republic of Congo, kidnapping eight of the 18 crewmembers.

Modus operandi differs by incident. In more opportunistic attacks, small gangs will target vessels identified to have a poor security profile, attacking under the cover of night to avoid detection. With armed robbery at sea, attackers often pose as fishermen to blend in with the many small craft, before identifying a target and launching a stealth attempt at night, where use of force is threatened if perpetrators encounter crew. In kidnappings for ransom, ‘high-value’ targets are identified beforehand. In the most sophisticated attacks, motherships may be used and intelligence gained from corrupt officials to support a hijacking and ship-to-ship transfers.

The involvement of government officials from various departments has not only provided perpetrators with valuable intelligence but, through bribes, has ensured that naval forces turn a blind eye at crucial moments. Moreover, rumours of high-level politicians directly receiving oil rents and oil companies assisting local groups in bunkering oil as a ‘cost of business’, demonstrate how licit and illicit economies in Nigeria have blended.

Mitigation efforts

Shipping companies have taken a number of ‘hardening’ measures to mitigate their vulnerability to attack. These include carrying armed guards deployed by security forces, such as in Nigeria, employing best practice management strategies for evasive measures, and awaiting berth outside high-risk waters such that vessels can move swiftly to port when required. However, private military security companies are not permitted in Nigerian waters, ruling out a method that proved most successful in combatting Somali piracy.
Nigeria instead allows shipping companies to hire security escort vessels carrying naval officers. This strategy is nevertheless reported to be prohibitively expensive and largely ineffective as a deterrent.

State-based and regional efforts have drawn limited success with some countries garnering better results than others. Togo, for example, has been the most enthusiastic in the region, and has managed to decrease incidents in its waters by increasing patrolling activities and being the most likely of states in the region to respond to distress calls. Nigeria, however, has a mixed record, with security forces being plagued by corruption, and the majority of its defence budget having been deployed to fight the many conflicts onshore. Nigeria also seldom responds to distress calls, having led to a trend in the late 2000s and early 2010s in which masters simply did not report attacks to local authorities.

At a regional level, the establishment of joint reporting centres and cooperation zones have been met with a positive response. However, these efforts, while extensive and proactive on paper, have been hampered by funding and capacity constraints as well as the Anglophone/Francophone divide in the region, alongside fears of amplifying Nigerian hegemony by allowing Abuja to take a leading role. As such, however useful these strategies may be, they are often not fully implemented, forcing the region to rely on support from external actors, including the EU and the US, who regularly conduct joint exercises and counter-piracy training drills.

**INSIGHT**

In the Gulf of Guinea, the nature, frequency, impact and geographical dispersion of piracy fluctuates as a result of a number of factors, including: the oil price, the exchange rate, whether fuel subsidies are in effect, the efficacy of state-based counter-piracy measures, the evasive behaviour of vessels and local politics. However, while the patterns of piracy are always shifting, the risk is never fully absent.

The threat of attacks of all kinds - ranging from petty theft to kidnap for ransom - will therefore continue in the medium to long term for a number of reasons. Poverty levels remain high, meaning that young men looking for income opportunities are numerous, policing and law enforcement remains weak, and governments are frequently distracted by other security and political issues, such as Islamist extremism onshore and local elections.

Shipping companies operating in this region should exercise caution, and 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.