

Gulf of Guinea kidnappings overlooked as tally edges higher

High rates of kidnapping in the Gulf of Guinea in 2019 show no sign of improving this year, with the piracy threat going under the radar as coronavirus dominates headlines

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Kidnap-and-ransom attacks off West Africa, less disruptive to cargo trade than Somali hijackings, have failed to prompt the same international response.



Source: Jason Florio/Corbis via Getty Images ATTACKS AT THE WEEKEND MAY HAVE PUT THE NUMBER OF SEAFARERS KIDNAPPED OFF WEST AFRICA PAST 50 SO FAR THIS YEAR, SAYS SECURITY CONSULTANCY DRYAD GLOBAL.

THE piracy threat in the Gulf of Guinea is being overlooked as coronavirus dominates headlines and the tally of kidnapped seafarers notches up, security experts say.

A spate of attacks at the weekend may have put the number of seafarers kidnapped off West Africa past 50 this year, according to security consultancy Dryad Global.

“The Nigerian piracy problem is being overlooked as everything seems to be about Covid-19,” said Jakob Larsen, head of maritime safety and security at BIMCO. “We need to shift our approach if we are ever to significantly reduce Nigerian based piracy, which is a plague to the whole of Gulf of Guinea.”

BIMCO secretary-general Angus Frew said earlier this year that efforts to stop pirates in 2019 had failed and capacity-building initiatives had “no effect whatsoever”.

Mr Frew said Nigerian pirates were responsible for 146 seafarers kidnapped, four security guards killed, one wounded, two seafarers killed, and more wounded since the start of 2019.

He said since then, no international naval ships had been deployed in anti-piracy operations, “except by coincidence,” and not a single pirate had been apprehended by the Nigerian Navy.

“Piracy off Nigeria has been going on for as long as I can remember. But it has reached a point where the situation is completely unacceptable,” he said.

Dryad Global said the number of kidnappings in 2020 so far mirrored last year and the gradual trend was toward fewer, but more severe attacks.

Control Risks, a consultancy, recorded 10 kidnappings in the Gulf of Guinea in the first four months of 2020 compared with 11 in 2019 — a year in which kidnappings increased 60% after a spike in the last quarter.

The International Maritime Bureau reported that 17 crew members were kidnapped in three incidents in the Gulf of Guinea, at distances of between 45 nautical miles and 75 nm from the coast, in the first quarter of the year. It found “no sign of a reduction in attacks worldwide” and warned many went unreported.

IMB director Michael Howlett said attacks were happening further out to sea, and higher numbers of crew were being taken. In December, two attacks — on the very large crude carrier *Nave Constellation* and the product tanker *Duke* — netted 19 and 20 crew members respectively. Mr Howlett called the numbers “remarkable”.

Control Risks also tracked an increase in the duration of the kidnappings, and said these trends were likely to hold. It said coronavirus lockdowns were unlikely to deter pirates from operating or reduce shipping traffic, and therefore possible targets, in the Gulf of Guinea.

“A multilateral security solution of the kind that reduced Somali piracy remains elusive in the Gulf of Guinea,” Control Risks associate director Nicola White said.

“Although some EU partners have a small patrol footprint in West African waters, and others provide training assistance to regional naval forces, maritime kidnapping rates have not materially reduced.”

Ms White said Somali piracy a decade ago had a far greater impact on global trade than today's attacks in the Gulf of Guinea. She said the Somali model of seizing entire vessels, their cargoes, and crews for months at a time had an outsize impact on trade, forcing governments and industry groups to respond with multilateral solutions.

But in the Gulf of Guinea model, some of the crew are kidnapped for ransom in the Niger Delta. Once the crew is replaced, the cargo can continue with minimal disruption.

"Thus, the globally aligned impetus to minimise the impact on trade is not yet present," Ms White said. "As a result, a large international response will probably not be forthcoming unless the situation deteriorates significantly."

Mr Frew said in January the desire for access to Nigeria's resources, especially its oil, made governments and commercial organisations unwilling to lobby its government to fight piracy effectively.

"When the international community is not willing to push for safety and security for our seafarers, the ensuing policy results in, not surprisingly, status quo," he said.

Mr Howlett said piracy in East and West Africa could not be compared because the East African governments could co-ordinate responses, unlike the failed state of Somalia. He said prevention was better than cure and urged vessels to stay vigilant.

"Looking further ahead, the economic impact of Covid-19, coupled with the previously existing permissive security environment, indicates that the underlying conditions for sustained or increased levels of maritime kidnapping will certainly be present," Ms White said. "However, if shipping levels dramatically reduce as a result of a diminished global economy, pirates may find it harder to find viable targets."