

Five kidnapped from fishing vessel in Gulf of Guinea

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Five crew members have been reportedly kidnapped from a fishing vessel in the Gulf of Guinea. A Ghana-flagged ship identified as **Atlantic Princess** (IMO 8124412) was boarded 65nm south of Tema on May 19th, according to Dryad Global.

The vessel was reported to have been approached by one speedboat with eight pirates onboard. The 1982-built ship was then fired upon prior to being boarded by armed men, according to reports. It was then said to have been hijacked and sailed south for 40nm before pirates departed the vessel, taking with them hostages of Chinese, Korean and Russian nationalities (three Chinese and one each from Korea and Russia), representing the captain, chief officer, second officer, chief engineer, and a bosun.

Dryad Maritime said that the latest attack ended a significant pause in activity in the Gulf of Guinea. This latest attack was the first kidnapping incident since March 15th. So far this year there have been 56 seafarers kidnapped from five vessels operating within the Gulf of Guinea.

The latest incident represented the furthest westerly kidnapping within the Gulf of Guinea to date, Dryad said, noting that “trends across the past 18 months have indicated a broadening of the piratical footprint within the Gulf of Guinea, beyond the traditional heartland of the Nigerian EEZ.”

Reports from crew members indicated that, two hours prior to the attack, a rusted looking mini tanker vessel was sighted on the horizon, with its AIS off. That vessel was understood to have manoeuvred away from the suspicious tanker. Given the significant distance of the incident from Nigerian waters, it was “a realistic possibility that the vessel sighted by the crew was being used as a mothership from which to launch and sustain deep offshore operations”, Dryad said. As of 07:30 UTC May 20th the ship was under way, heading for Accra, according to reports.

The latest incident came in the same week as international efforts once again called for action to end the attacks on ships in the region, with 125 companies from

across the maritime industry signing the newly launched Gulf of Guinea Declaration.

Initiated by the shipping association BIMCO and drafted by a group of shipowners, the declaration highlights the human and economic toll of piracy, calling for tangible efforts to end the threat of piracy in the Gulf of Guinea.

The International Maritime Organization also released a statement calling for “increased collaboration and action to tackle an escalation in the number and severity of attacks in the Gulf of Guinea.”

The IMO Maritime Safety Committee adopted a resolution in its recent meeting calling on “Member States, national authorities, the United Nations and other relevant organizations to consider strengthening law enforcement to arrest and prosecute pirates in relevant jurisdictions, in accordance with international law and national legal frameworks.”

The Nigerian government has said it was prepared to launch the next phase of its aggressive efforts to end the activities originating from its country and in its coastal waters. This would entail the formal launch of the Integrated National Security and Waterways Protection Infrastructure programme, otherwise known as Deep Blue.

This is a joint programme from the Nigerian Federal Ministry of Transportation and Ministry of Defence, involving the Nigerian Maritime Administration and Safety Agency, Nigerian police and military.

The combined forces will work on land, sea, and air to prevent illegal activities and enforce maritime security on the inland waterways, the Nigerian Exclusive Economic Zone, and the anchorage off Lagos. However, the programme could be stretched thinly. It is also being asked to provide increased security for the Nigerian oil industry and to combat drug trafficking, arms and human smuggling.

It is possible that enough machinery will be available for this range of tasks. Nigeria has been receiving international assistance for the Deep Blue programme. This has included the delivery of Italian aircraft, boats, and command and communication technology. There will be 600 troops in a special trained Maritime Security Unit, plus armoured vehicles for coastal patrol, aircraft and drones for aerial surveillance, and fast inspector boats and special mission vessels. A communication and command centre will gather data and coordinate the efforts.

Nigerian officials were expected to unveil the full programme at the weekend. The problem for Nigeria, and Deep Blue, is that the pirates are widening the range of their activities at sea far beyond the scope of the Deep Blue programme. 1982-built, Ghana-flagged, 768 gt Atlantic Princess is owned by Zhong Gha Foods Co Ltd care of manager Africa Star Fisheries of Accra, Ghana.

It said that “it is therefore imperative that non-regional countries provide the necessary assets on a rotation basis, and that one or more states in the area support the effort with logistics and prosecution of arrested pirates. The Declaration does not aspire to provide the long-term solution to the piracy problem but to help make seafarers safe today.”

BIMCO accepted that “the root causes of the piracy problem in the Gulf of Guinea can only be solved by Nigeria”.

With some 30m people living in the Niger Delta, many under difficult conditions, “it would be naïve to think that anyone other than Nigeria can address the roots of the piracy problem”.