

Piracy in the Amazon: Fixing the River Rat problem

By admin On June 30, 2021 In Cargo, Insurance Marine News, Keep, Marine Hull, Marine Liability

Damian Mustard, Senior Underwriter at West P&I Club, has noted that West's Fixed Premium book had expanded to become one of the largest insurers of tugs and barges in South America.

However, Mustard also observed that one particularly prominent and growing issue was river piracy in the Amazon – which was having a detrimental impact on barges that operated on inland waterways, as well as on their crews.

Mustard said that the barges were usually laden with valuable cargoes which could be easy to load or unload. In areas where vast inland waterways were insufficiently policed, these kinds of vessels could be an easy target for pirates. He said that these conditions were particularly common in the Amazon areas, where locals called these criminals 'river rats'.

In such attacks, commonly a small group of pirates would board a push tug that was leading a barge convoy at night. Under the cover of darkness and using the element of surprise, they would enter the vessel and overpower the crew. These pirates were often armed, and posed a serious danger to seafarers and their vessels.

Once the pirates had control of the barge convoy, any cargo that was transferable would be offloaded to their boats. This would include the product from any fuel-carrying tank barges, which pirates would often access by drilling a hole on the barge's hull and transferring the cargo with a hose.

The simplicity of a 'river rat' attack meant that there was not a significant barrier to entry for criminals. As they only needed a small group of attackers – typically only three or four people – organization was rarely a significant challenge. There was no shortage of available boats capable of transferring the stolen property to land.

As a consequence, organized crime rings in the region saw these kinds of attacks as a low-risk, high-reward enterprise.

With economic conditions having deteriorated in the region, West had recently seen a rise in the number of incidents, both in general and in specific port locations.

Alberto Pinheiro Carvalho, Diretor de Relações Institucionais at Brazil P&I, recently highlighted to Mustard that cases had increased notably in the anchorage number 2 of Macapa Port. This meant that the risk to cargoes had increased, and also to crews and vessels – as violent exchanges or other actions associated with piracy could cause crew injury or trauma, or cause significant structural or technical damage to a barge or tug. Therefore it was not just a cargo risk, but one of hull and liability as well.

The risks from these attacks could also become compliance issues, said Mustard, noting that his team recently dealt with an incident where raiders attacked an empty vessel in port, stealing the barge's whole safe and the crucial compliance documents inside. Documenting this loss with authorities and repopulating the documents created a complex and time-consuming challenge that compounded all the other losses suffered.

Armed security guards were becoming an increasingly popular deterrent on some barges, especially those travelling at night, or those with a vulnerable cargo. As many 'river rats' were only lightly armed, and many more opportunistic groups were looking specifically for easy targets, the presence of armed security guards could be an effective deterrent. However, some thieves carried heavier weaponry – especially those connected to organized crime – which could be more than guards could deal with.

Mustard said that to further cut risk, crew training awareness had to be adapted to highlight the need of constant surveillance of the surroundings of the vessels, including radar surveillance to prevent approaching of small boats. Infrared cameras should also be used on barges during night navigation and while overnight in port areas, to allow crews and guards to see 'river rats' before they have boarded a vessel, meaning that they no longer have the element of surprise.

Easy-to-handle material storage compartments should also be transported in compartments located at the bow of the vessel, away from the bridge, and physical barriers should be used to make it more secure. This meant that food, paint cans, cables, or other valuable cargoes would be more difficult for thieves to access and transport.

Mustard said that perhaps the most important tool that shipowners had was the loss prevention expertise within their P&I insurer. Up-to-date, circumstance-specific guidance could help a shipowner to understand the practical risks they faced from a route, and what practical avenues were available to cut those risks. This could include installing new security systems, but it could also include tailoring vessel plans to avoid high risk situations.

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