

IMB advises caution despite global piracy falling to a 28-year low

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Maritime piracy and armed robbery attacks fell to the lowest recorded level since 1994 according to the just-published annual piracy report of the ICC International Maritime Bureau (IMB). However, the report advised that caution was still needed.

The IMB attributed the drop in incidents to the vigorous action taken by authorities in 2021, particularly in the Gulf of Guinea.

IMB Director Michael Howlett said that, while the overall reduction in globally reported incidents was welcomed, the IMB Piracy Reporting Centre urged coastal states to acknowledge the inherent risk from piracy and armed robbery and to address “robustly” this crime within the waters of their exclusive economic zone.

In 2021, the IMB Piracy Reporting Centre received 132 incidents of piracy and armed robbery against ships, down from 195 instances in 2020, and lower than the 162 such incidents reported in 2019.

The rise in recent years was attributable to an increase of piracy and armed robbery reported within the Gulf of Guinea. There was also an increase in armed robbery activity in the Singapore Straits, although most of these were close to land rather than on the high seas.

In 2021 there were reports of 115 vessels boarded worldwide, with at least 11 failed attempts. IMB data says that five vessels were fired upon, with one reported hijacking.

There were still 57 seafarers kidnapped in 2021, with eight others taken hostage and one killed. The Gulf of Guinea continues to account for all kidnapping incidents globally, including six crew from a container vessel in mid-December.

IMB data showed that crews were equally at risk at anchor or underway. Last year's incidents were nearly evenly split. Ships at dock were the least likely place for ships to be boarded or attacked. Bulkers reported 47 attacks, with containerships and

tankers each reporting about 30 incidents during the year. IMB observed that this did not mean that pirates were targeting bulk carriers, as there were more bulk carriers at sea.

The Gulf of Guinea region saw a decrease from 81 reported incidents in 2020 to 34 in 2021. Howlett said that the IMB commended the robust actions of the international navies and regional authorities in the Gulf of Guinea “which appears to have positively contributed to the drop in reported incidents and ensuring continued safety to crews and trade”, adding that “while the IMB applauds these actions it further calls on the coastal states of the Gulf of Guinea to increase their collaboration and physical presence in their waters to ensure a long term and sustainable solution to address the crime of piracy and armed robbery in the region.”

In the Singapore Straits there was a 50% year on year increase, with 35 incidents reported against vessels navigating the traffic lane. That was the highest number of reported incidents since 1992. Vessels were boarded in 33 of the 35 incidents.

Most of these were more in the line of opportunistic thefts rather than piracy in the historically accepted sense. Two crew were injured in two separate cases. Knives were reported in 13 of the reported incidents and guns in a further two.

Elsewhere in the far east piracy was down. The IMB reported nine incidents in the Indonesian Archipelago, the lowest level since 1993.

There appeared to be marginal growth in maritime attacks in South America and Latin America. Ports in Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Mexico and Haiti were hit by incidents of armed robbery at sea. The 36 incidents reported in 2021 was six higher than the number reported in 2020. Six crew were threatened, four taken hostage and two assaulted. The majority of the 31 vessels boarded were at anchor at the time. The major source of growth looked to be the Peruvian anchorage of Callao where incidents more than doubled to 18 in 2021.