

Italian frigate intervened to protect crew on bulker from pirates

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It has been confirmed that bulk carrier **Arch Gabriel** (IMO 9714719) was the vessel attacked and boarded by pirates on April 3rd (see yesterday's *IMN*). It has transpired that Italian Navy frigate **Luigi Rizzo**, which was positioned 280 nm from the drifting bulk carrier, responded to a distress signal sent by the ship.

A helicopter with a special forces team on board flew from the frigate to the bulk carrier. The special forces team boarded the ship, but the pirates had already fled.

By midday, the Luigi Rizzo had also arrived in the area. They proceeded to search the area around the bulker verifying the absence of armed personnel on the open decks as well as of suspicious boats in the surrounding area.

The ship's crew was released from citadel, with all of them reported as safe and uninjured.

"At around 2 pm, an operation was started which saw the insertion of a boarding team on the merchant vessel by helicopter while the frigate Luigi Rizzo guaranteed the necessary safety support," the Italian Navy writes in their mission summary. "After about an hour, the Navy boarding team completed the search of the merchant ship, took control of it, and having verified the absence of pirates or other hostile personnel on board, freed the crew that had remained in the citadel."

Members from the brigade remained aboard the Arch Gabriel while the crew repaired damage from the pirates. The frigate also provided an escort as the bulker sailed into an anchorage closer to shore.

The crew repaired the equipment and mechanisms that had been damaged by pirates, causing it to drift, and the Arch Gabriel was under way again.

According to the report from the Italian Navy, once the frigate reached a “useful distance,” and the first light of dawn on April 4, one of their helicopters was dispatched with members of the specialized Marina San Marco Brigade, trained in safety and boarding activities. Arriving in the area, the aircraft acquired radio contact with the crew of the bulker determining that they were safe in the citadel. The helicopter continued to patrol the area around the bulker.

The Italian Navy said that the team had taken “a series of actions that dissuaded the pirates from continuing in the illicit activity.”

The Luigi Rizzo is on its third deployment to the Gulf of Guinea as part of the multi-national effort to enhance security for merchant ships in the area. The vessel had departed Italy on February 24th and its mission patrolling the Gulf of Guinea will last until June.

Dryad Maritime noted that this attack marked an apparent break after a significant hiatus in reports.

The Arch Gabriel, registered in the Marshall Islands, had been laying off West Africa since mid-March. It had departed Houston in mid-February and was probably waiting for another contract, meaning that it could have been seen as a target of opportunity, having been idle for such a long period.

Dryad also pointed out that this incident highlighted that the area of activity had moved further out from the coast. The attack took place more than 110nm outside the Nigerian EEZ.

A dramatic decline in piracy in the Gulf of Guinea started in 2021, with the “high season” in the last quarter of the year noticeably quieter than in the immediately preceding years. Dryad highlighted Nigerian security effort “Deep Blue” as one factor, although several elements were likely to have contributed to the decline, including an increased international presence. The number of vessels boarded throughout the region fell by more than half last year, according to Dryad’s report.

At the end of January 2022 pirates fired upon a ferry in Equatorial Guinea, but the onboard security forces returned fire, which appeared both to catch the pirates by surprise and to scare them off. The last significant incident was at the end of 2021 when pirates killed one crewmember and kidnapped as many

as six others from a Chinese-owned fishing vessel operating near Equatorial Guinea.