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A New Dimension to Global Piracy – Increased Attacks in the Gulf of Guinea

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Synopsis

The Gulf of Guinea has emerged as a new “hot spot” for global piracy. Increased attacks threaten the economic development of the region, particularly the exploitation of its marine resources.

Commentary

THE GULF of Guinea is emerging as a new “hot spot” for sea piracy although incidents off the Horn of Africa and in Southeast Asia have attracted most attention.

The Gulf of Guinea abuts the shores of West and Central Africa between Guinea Bissau and Angola; prominent countries in the region include Ghana, Liberia and Nigeria. Large quantities of oil, fish and other marine resources make the region a potentially rich economic zone. Regional countries produce more than 5 million barrels of oil per day and more than three quarters of the world’s supply of cocoa.

However, the region has more than its fair share of problems, including civil unrest, political instability, border disputes, corruption and poor governance. Increased piracy is now another problem requiring regional cooperation and international assistance to address it effectively.

Despite the difficult environment of the Gulf of Guinea, international oil companies have been attracted to it, particularly its offshore oil and gas resources. Activities associated with the exploration and exploitation of these resources have proven to be highly vulnerable to pirate attack.

Increased Piracy

According to the International Maritime Bureau (IMB), 52 actual and attempted piracy attacks were reported around the Gulf of Guinea during 2011, as opposed to 39 in 2010. 19 attacks occurred in the first quarter of 2012. The 52 attacks in 2011 represent about 12 per cent of the total attacks around the world during the year. Along with the Horn of Africa with 239 attacks during the year and Southeast Asia with 101, these three areas account for nearly 90 per cent of global piracy.

While most attacks have occurred off Nigeria, more attacks occurred in 2011 in the waters off Benin with 20 attacks during the year as compared with only one in the previous four years. The situation off Nigeria improved during 2011 with 10 attacks that year compared with 19 in 2010. The first quarter of 2012 saw a resurgence of

attacks off Nigeria, but there was some improvement off Benin, partly due to joint naval patrols by Nigeria and Benin.

Some attacks off Benin and Nigeria involve a ship being hijacked and a significant part of its cargo stolen – losses from each attack range from US\$2 million to \$6 million. These attacks suggest considerable planning, organisation and sophisticated modes of operation by the pirates. Most attacks occur at night and target oil and chemical tankers that are stationary while conducting ship-to-ship transfer operations, often at a distance of over 40 nautical miles offshore.

In a recent incident, the 76,600 dwt product tanker BW RHINE was seized from an anchorage off Togo on April 28. The vessel was released a few days later after some of its cargo of gasoline had been stolen. According to the IMB, at least 16 similar incidents have been reported along the coastline from Togo to Nigeria over the past year.

Impact of Piracy

Piracy in the Gulf of Guinea has its origins in political instability, corruption and the economic problems of the region. Oil and gas developments, particularly offshore in the Gulf of Guinea, provide attractive targets. Attacks in Nigeria in the 1990s were often perpetrated by groups such as the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) which attacked pipelines and offshore platforms.

It has been estimated that piracy currently results in an annual loss of about US\$2 billion to the economy of the West African subregion. Nigeria is believed to lose about 7 per cent of its oil revenues to criminal activities. A large and highly developed black market for oil and its products exists in the region.

Piracy in the region affects the operation of vessels associated with the exploration and exploitation of offshore oil and gas, such as seismic research vessels and offshore supply vessels. Seismic survey vessels are low and slow and thus vulnerable to 'hit and run' attacks to steal valuables or even kidnap crew members. Unlike Somali pirates, West African pirates have no place to hold a vessel securely while ransom negotiations take place; so they sometimes kidnap crew members, usually more senior or highly skilled technical people who may attract higher ransoms.

Countering Piracy

Countries around the Gulf of Guinea are sensitive to foreign warships patrolling in their waters. An international naval response to piracy in the region would be controversial in the light of broad regional wariness over perceptions of external interference. Regional leaders believe that the presence of foreign warships might be more destabilizing than helpful if they widened the strategic nature of the problem and attracted criminal or terrorist attacks.

Countering piracy in the region requires extensive capacity-building assistance. The required capacity includes the development of national legal frameworks; national and regional arrangements to better coordinate anti-piracy activities and information-sharing; and the necessary operational resources (ships, aircraft, skilled people and surveillance systems).

Various initiatives under the umbrella of the UN and the International Maritime Organisation (IMO) are now underway to develop the required capacity in the region. Fortunately there are several reasonably strong regional organisations, such as the Gulf of Guinea Commission and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), to provide the necessary regional cooperation and dialogue.

Nevertheless, just as elsewhere in the world, the fight against piracy and sea robbery in West Africa begins on land. Any viable or lasting regional strategy to combat piracy needs to take account of the root causes of regional piracy: high levels of youth unemployment, wide income disparities within society, the uncontrolled circulation of illicit weapons, and the prevalence of corruption.

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