

The Confluence of Armed Maritime Crime in the Gulf of Guinea: Scope and Impact

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Introduction

The Gulf of Guinea (GoG) – a coastal zone that extends from Senegal in the north to Angola in the south – provides an economic lifeline to both littoral and land-locked states in West Africa and is of strategic importance to the rest of the world in terms of trade links and, especially, energy reserves. Unfortunately, the region is beset with a major and proliferating problem of maritime crime, which has steadily expanded from the Niger Delta to affect the territorial waters of Benin, Cameroon, the Ivory Coast, Ghana, Guinea, Togo and Gabon. This paper examines the scope and impact of illicit sea-borne activity in the GoG. It first looks at some of the chief threats in the region, focusing on piracy and armed robbery at sea, illicit oil bunkering and drug trafficking. The paper then goes on to delineate some of the main implications these challenges pose for national, regional and international security.

Piracy and Armed Maritime Robbery

Between 2009 and June 2014, 265 acts of piracy and armed maritime robbery occurred in the GoG.¹ The region has now decisively surpassed the Horn of Africa (HoA) in terms of attack levels and during first half of 2014 accounted for 19 incidents (compared with just four in the Gulf of Aden/GoA).² The most dangerous waters lie off Nigeria, which in 2013 saw 31 attacks (actual and attempted), just under two thirds (63.2 percent) of all those that occurred in the wider GoG coastal belt (see Figure 1).³

Most attacks in the GoG occur in national or coastal waters and generally take the form of ship boardings with the aim of stealing equipment, money and other portable valuables that are immediately transferred to a secondary skiff or barge for transfer to land. Outright hijackings also take place. However, unlike the HoA where perpetrating groups attempt to extort ransoms for both the captured vessel and its crew, the main objective in the GoG is the theft of cargo that is then sold on the black market.⁴ All types of freighters are targeted, although it is tankers carrying petroleum products that are especially favored on account of the value of their payload.

Because gangs operating in these waters are not concerned with leveraging hostages for money, accompanying levels of violence tend to be high, again eclipsing anything that has been witnessed in the GoA.⁵ Lethality has been further fueled by the abundance of combat weaponry in West Africa, which includes everything from Beretta AR-70 light machine guns to AK-47, G3, FNC and FAL assault rifles, anti-personnel mines and rocket propelled grenades (RPGs). Most of these munitions are procured from leftover stocks in war-ravaged parts of the sub-region (notably Sierra Leone and Liberia), illicit arms traders or corrupt members of the security forces.⁶

Apart from attacks on ships, there have been numerous strikes against offshore oil platforms, particularly in and around the Niger Delta. These assaults are typically carried out by organized tribal militias and generally justified under the rubric of promoting social, political and economic change. In most cases raiders use powerful, highly maneuverable speedboats – often equipped with on-board cannons – to quickly surround and overcome pre-selected targets in succession. These swarm-based tactics are aimed at full system disruption either by forcing the complete shutdown of production or by delaying/halting on-going repairs.⁷

Illicit Oil Bunkering

Illegal bunkering – a process that entails tapping oil pipelines and extracting their contents onto barges for re-sale – is an activity that almost exclusively takes place in the Niger Delta. Initially a relatively small-scale enterprise, this has since developed into a thriving “business” generating windfall profits that are both augmenting the threat potential of armed militias and depriving the state of a vital source of revenue.⁸

The actual mechanics of bunkering is a complex affair that involves several players. It starts in the marshlands of the Delta and culminates in the coastal waters of Nigeria’s exclusive economic zone (EEZ). The entire operation involves several stages: the initial siphoning of the oil and its collection on a holding barge; the processing of the tapped crude in one of the many illegal refineries in the Delta; the transfer of the refined petroleum to a coastal vessel; and its final delivery to a super freighter anchored off-shore where it is either sold for an agreed price - often with the tacit approval of corrupt officials - exchanged for weapons or both.⁹

The scale of illegal oil theft taking place in the Delta is difficult to quantify given the covert nature of the enterprise, official corruption and the lack of consistent reporting data. James Ibori, the former Governor of Delta State, believes as much as 300,000 barrels per day (bpd) of crude could be lost every day as a result of organized theft. Multinationals operating in the region reject this as an overestimation, but still approximate an overall robbery rate of between 150,000 and 200,000 bpd. Other analysts put the figure closer to 100,000 bpd.¹⁰ Whatever the case, the extent of the problem is clearly enormous – cutting deeply into Nigeria’s average output of 2 million bpd and costing the government and oil companies heavily in lost revenue.

Many of the same tribal militias involved in attacking off-shore oil platforms in the GoG remain at the forefront of bunkering in the Delta. The Ijaw people constitute the bulk of the population in this region, most of who live in abject poverty despite the fact that the majority of Nigeria’s oil wealth – which makes up 80 percent of the country’s GDP and 95 percent of its foreign exchange earnings - is pumped out of the Rivers and Delta states. Over the past decade, several groups have taken up arms to fight for a more equitable share of the region’s oil wealth, using profits from illegal oil sales to fund their respective campaigns against the Nigerian state. Prominent examples include the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) and its subsidiary groups,¹¹ the Niger People’s Volunteer Force (NDPVF), the Niger Delta Vigilantes (NDV) and the People’s Liberation Force (PLF).¹²

Drug Trafficking

Drug trafficking in the GoG centers on the international cocaine trade. The region has emerged as an increasingly important transshipment hub for Latin American drug syndicates seeking to diversify from an almost exclusive focus on the United States to consumers in Europe. The growing emphasis on the latter market reflects higher street prices as well as shifting demand patterns towards cocaine and highly addictive derivatives such as crack.

The main transshipment hubs in the GoG include Sierra Leone, Guinea, Ghana, Senegal and especially Guinea Bissau. All of these countries have weak judicial systems, lack the resources for effective (or even rudimentary) coastal surveillance and are beset by rampant corruption – traits that make them ideal as transfer points for moving narcotics out of Latin America. According to estimates from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

(UNODC), at least 50 tons of refined cocaine (valued at around \$2 billion) bound for Europe is shipped through the GoG every year.¹³

Within the region, Guinea-Bissau forms the apex of smuggling activity - so much so that the country is now generally considered to be the world's first genuine narco-state. The value of drugs that pass through this West African nation rival that of its official economy while complicity in the trade extends to the very highest levels of the military and governing civil bureaucracy.¹⁴ In 2013, the head of Guinea-Bissau's armed forces, General Antonio Injai, was indicted in absentia by a New York court on cocaine and weapons trafficking charges that directly tied him to the criminal enterprises of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC).¹⁵ Two weeks earlier the former chief of the Navy, Rear Admiral José Américo Bubo Na Tchuto, was arrested in a Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) sting operation during which he admitted to undercover agents that he could arrange for the storage and transfer of Colombian cocaine at a rate of \$1 million for every 1,000 kilograms brought into the country.¹⁶

Maritime Crime in the GoG: National, Regional and International Implications

Maritime crime holds real dangers for the countries of the GoG with their dependency on the resources and commerce originating from this part of the world. Attacks on shipping have detracted from the Gulf's status as a safe oceanic trading corridor with vessel owner-operators exhibiting a growing reluctance to pay the higher insurance premiums that are now required for transiting the region's waters.

Rampant corruption engendered from organized oil theft and drug trafficking has further encouraged and entrenched what was already a serious problem of official graft. This has, in turn, undermined popular confidence and trust in elected officials, members of the armed forces and agents of law and order.

Tribal militias in the Niger Delta have had a profound impact on the domestic stability of Nigeria, the political anchor for both the GoG and West Africa more generally. Not only have groups such as MEND, NDV and NDPVF helped to normalize violence as an accepted form of social action, their criminal actions have directly impacted oil output. According to Rear Admiral Oyagha, Director of the Nigerian Navy's Transformation Office, the state lost an average of 1,656,281 barrels a month to oil theft in 2013.¹⁷

Beyond its national and regional effects, maritime crime in the GoG has relevance for broader international security. The region is now a critical transshipment node for Andean cocaine, which is both boosting the insurgent war chest of FARC (which is thought to earn between \$200 and \$300 million from the trade) as well as “feeding” a growing addiction and drug-related crime problem in Western Europe. Equally as important, the activities of pirates and militias are disrupting oil production in an area that accounts for around four percent of the world’s total petroleum output.

On top of these issues maritime crime is contributing to a lack of governance across a wider geographic space that hosts or lies proximate to two prominent zones of terrorist activity: Boko Haram in northern Nigeria/Cameroon and Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in the Sahel.¹⁸ Both of these organizations stand to benefit from the instability that is being engendered in the GoG - if not directly through access to money, weapons and recruits, at least tangentially in terms of being able to leverage favorable operating conditions that are typically a by-product of weak state structures.

Sea Blindness?

While efforts have been made to boost maritime domain awareness and secure the waters of the region, most initiatives have proceeded from the assumption that threats can best be dealt with at sea. This is at odds with the basic reality that the main drivers for maritime crime in this part of Africa stem from land, notably economic marginalization, social deprivation, poverty and corruption. Until comprehensive moves are made to mitigate these root causes - particularly in the Niger Delta, which constitutes a main source for many of the sea-based threats currently afflicting the Gulf - issues such as piracy, oil theft and drug trafficking will remain an enduring feature of the wider GoG landscape.¹⁹

Endnotes

¹ International Maritime Bureau (hereafter referred to as IMB), *Piracy and Armed Robbery Against Ships: Report for the Period 1 January – 31 March 2013* (London: IMB, April 2014), 5.

² IMB, *Piracy and Armed Robbery Against Ships: Report for the Period 1 January – 30 June 2014* (London: IMB, July 2014), 5-6.

³ IMB, *Piracy and Armed Robbery Against Ships: Report for the Period 1 January – 31 December 2013*, 5.

⁴ Adjoa Anyimadu, *Maritime Security in the Gulf of Guinea: Lessons Learned from the Indian Ocean* (London: Chatham House, Africa Paper 2013/02, July 2013), 3; Ryan Cummings, "The Rise and Rise of Piracy in the Gulf of Guinea," Think Africa Press, July 18, 2013.

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¹⁰ Ikelegbe, "The Economy of Conflict in the Oil Rich Niger Delta Region of Nigeria," 222; Human Rights Watch, *The Warri Crisis: Fueling Violence*, Human Right Watch Report 15/18A (2003): 17-18; Kenneth Ehigiator, Kenneth, "Oil Smugglers accused of Fueling Warri Crisis," *Vanguard Newspaper*, August 21, 2003; Neil Ford, "In Deep Water," *Jane's Intelligence Review* (August 2008): 56; Lincoln, "Thinking Globally: Countering Piracy in West Africa"; "Nigeria Losing a Fifth of Revenue to Oil Theft – Report," *Reuters*, May 15, 2012.

¹¹ These include the Federated Niger Delta Ijaw Communities (FNDIC), the Outlaws, "General" Boyloaf and the Niger Delta Strike Force (NDSF).

¹² Jean Herskovits, "Nigeria's Rigged Democracy," *Foreign Affairs* (July/August 2007): 123-125; Ford, "In Deep Water," 57; Ghosh, *Waiting to Explode: Piracy in the Gulf of Guinea*, 11-13; Cummings, "The Rise and Rise of Piracy in the Gulf of Guinea"; Tomas Malinas, "Militancy in Niger Delta," Matthew B. Ridway Center for International Security Studies, University of Pittsburgh, n.d.a, available online at <http://www.ridgway.pitt.edu/RidgwayResearch/Issues/InternationalPeaceSecurity/BackgroundersIPS/tabid/552/smid/1686/ArticleID/646/reftab/497/t/Militancy-in-the-Niger-Delta/Default.aspx>, as of July 23, 2013.

¹³ *West Africa Coast Initiative* (New York: UNODC, 2013), available on-line at <https://www.unodc.org/westandcentralafrica/en/west-africa-coast-initiative.html>, as of July 23, 2013.

¹⁴ Anyimadu, *Maritime Security in the Gulf of Guinea: Lessons Learned from the Indian Ocean*, 6.

¹⁵ Adam Nossiter, "U.S. Indicts Guinea-Bissau's Military Chief in Drug Case," *The New York Times*, April 19, 2013. At the time of writing Injai remained free in Guinea-Bissau.

¹⁶ Adam Nossiter, "U.S. Sting That Snared African Ex-Admiral Shines a Light on the Drug Trade," *The New York Times*, April 16, 2013.

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