

Piracy – increasing number of attacks in the Gulf of Guinea

West African piracy attacks are increasing in both number and range according to the International Maritime Bureau's (IMB) Piracy Reporting Centre and the US Maritime Liaison Office (MARLO) Weekly Piracy & Threat Summary (PATS). In 2012 so far there have been more than 21 attacks in the Gulf of Guinea, with three vessels having been hijacked. Some 42 crew members have been taken hostage and two kidnapped by pirates. Anchorages off Lome, Cotonou, Lagos and Port Harcourt are highly susceptible to incidents of armed robbery, kidnappings and hijackings. More than six boarding attempts took place south of Lome, Togo during April 2012. According to the IMB Piracy Reporting Centre, at least six of the 11 reported incidents off Nigeria occurred more than 70 nautical miles from the coast, which suggests that fishing vessels are being used as mother ships to attack shipping further offshore. Despite the fact that the number of reported incidents in Nigeria is still less than that of incidents occurring off Somalia, and that vessels hijacked there tend to be under the control of the pirates for days rather than months, the level of violence against crew is dangerously high.

Pirates in West Africa have attacked, hijacked and robbed vessels and kidnapped crews all along the coast, at anchorages, in rivers and ports and surrounding waters. In most cases pirates armed with assault rifles have approached anchored vessels in one or two speed boats with 6-8 pirates in each; one boat approaching from the forward and the other from the aft. In some cases the crew have observed that the speed boats have been launched from a nearby fishing trawler. Hijacked vessels have been forced to sail to unknown locations where the vessels property and sometimes part of the cargo has been stolen. In some cases the pirates have transferred part of the cargo to other vessels in order to sell it. Cargoes of petroleum products seem to attract particular attention. Where the purpose of the attack is robbery of the crew only, with no cargo theft, the attack normally lasts a few hours and the violence perpetrated is usually proportional to the crew's resistance. However, in some cases pirates have reportedly fired at vessels injuring a number of crew members.

Reports indicate that the pirates move away once they see the crew raising the alarm, directing spotlights towards the approaching boats and laying razor wire around the ship. In a case where the pirates succeeded in boarding the vessel the crew had retreated to the citadel after raising the alarm and notifying Togo navy officials and the local coastguard. In at least two cases the crew reportedly hid in the vessel's citadel until the local coast guard arrived on board the vessel and forced the pirates off. However, local coast guard and naval capacity is generally insufficient to carry out regular patrols or provide a reliable emergency response in such a large area. It is therefore important that the citadel is secure and resistant to any attack.

Gard's Members and clients using anchorages in the Gulf of Guinea or anchoring anywhere along the coast should be aware of the increasing number of boarding attempts in this area and are advised to be vigilant and maintain all anti-piracy watches and measures. Whether (armed) guards¹ are on board or not, ships should carry out a full risk assessment and follow the appropriate advice in BMP4 before anchoring in the Gulf of Guinea. Although BMP are primarily designed for Somali piracy where the mode of operation is different, many of the fundamental principles also apply to piracy and armed robbery elsewhere. Armed guards on board vessels are proving a success in many cases, but concerns are rising that vessels are being tempted not to follow BMP and not report attempted attacks as a result. Compliance with BMP should be the "default" position. The employment of (armed) guards may be in addition to, but not instead of, compliance with BMP. Risk assessments should therefore allow for the fact that the unexpected can happen. If the vessel is threatened by pirates in any way, the vessel should consider weighing anchor and proceeding to a safe distance from the area.

¹ Certain companies are providing armed escorts for vessels in Nigeria under licenses issued by the Nigerian military and using serving military personnel. Agents are also placing local armed guards consisting of police and military personnel on board. These guards are hired through serving Nigerian officers against payment and are hired more for reassurance of the crew than to provide an effective fighting unit.