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Gulf of Guinea: Recent Trends in Piracy and Armed Robbery

Armed attacks against ships in the oil-rich Gulf of Guinea surged in 2018, making these waters off West and Central Africa the world's most dangerous for piracy and armed robbery. The escalation confirms the Gulf of Guinea's status as the main locus for maritime insecurity in Africa, which had long been associated with the Horn of Africa, particularly Somalia. Rising piracy and armed robbery in the Gulf of Guinea likely reflects the region's growing prominence in global maritime trade, as well as capacity and coordination gaps among many of the region's navies.

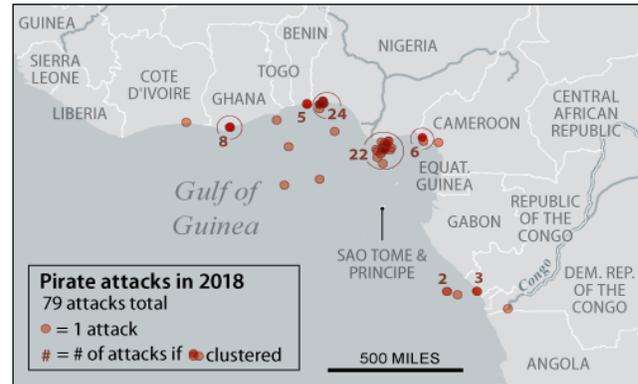
Successive U.S. Administrations have considered maritime security in the Gulf of Guinea to be of U.S. strategic interest. U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM)'s 2019 *Posture Statement*, provided as written testimony to Congress in February, describes the Gulf of Guinea as “a strategic priority due to its role in global oil markets, trade routes, and the residence of approximately 75,000 U.S. citizens” in the region. Accordingly, the Departments of Defense and State support country-level and cross-border efforts to curtail piracy and other illicit maritime activity in the region. Such programs notably seek to build the capacity of African navies to combat piracy, patrol territorial waters, and bolster interregional coordination.

Congress has authorized the State Department and Department of Defense (DOD) to provide training and equipment to foreign security forces for maritime security and related purposes, such as counter-narcotics and countering organized crime. Congress also has expressed an enduring interest in facilitating U.S. trade and investment in Africa, which may be deterred by security threats at sea. The 116th Congress may continue to shape U.S. engagement through the authorization and appropriation of assistance for maritime security and through oversight activities.

Piracy and Armed Robbery Trends

The United Nations (U.N.) defines armed robbery at sea as attacks on ships within a country's territorial waters and piracy as attacks in waters outside any country's territory or exclusive economic zone. The U.S. Office of Naval Intelligence (ONI) documented 146 incidents of piracy and armed robbery in the Gulf of Guinea in 2018—a 24% increase over 2017 and the highest level in a decade. Using a different methodology, the International Maritime Bureau (IMB), a body of the International Chamber of Commerce, recorded 79 such incidents—more than double the IMB's regional tally in 2017. According to the IMB, the Gulf of Guinea accounted for 40% of piracy and maritime armed robbery incidents documented globally in 2018, including all six hijackings and 78 of 83 kidnappings. These figures likely understate true levels of criminality due to persistent under-reporting, possibly motivated by shipping firms' interest in protecting their corporate reputations.

Figure 1. Piracy/Robbery in the Gulf of Guinea, 2018



Source: Graphic created by CRS using data from IMB (2018), the Department of State (2017), the National Geospatial Intelligence Agency (2019), and DeLorme (2017).

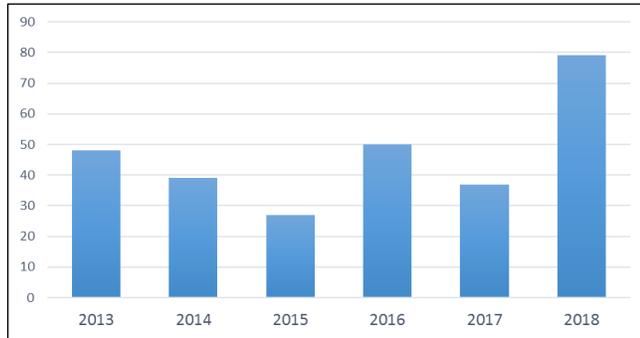
Attacks in the Gulf of Guinea are concentrated in waters off Nigeria. To the southwest of the country, robbers primarily target vessels in port or at anchorage, ransacking the ships before fleeing. Meanwhile, attacks in waters off the oil-rich Niger Delta region to the southeast often occur at sea and involve crew member kidnappings. Exploiting the Delta's vast coastline and river networks, attackers often take victims ashore pending ransom payments. Insecurity in the Niger Delta is reportedly tied to criminality ashore, where grievances over perceived marginalization and ecological degradation have long fueled insecurity. In this regard, the Nigerian government's 2009 introduction of an amnesty and stipend for ex-Niger Delta militants may have helped to reduce the recruitment of some militants into piracy.

A Return of Petro-Piracy?

At least six hijackings in 2018 targeted oil tankers, up from zero recorded tanker hijackings in 2017. The spike has raised concern of a possible resurgence in “petro-piracy,” or tanker hijackings for oil theft. Such attacks peaked in 2011, when tankers off Benin were regularly targeted, prompting Benin and Nigeria to launch joint patrols that helped quell the hijackings. Notably, most of the 2018 tanker hijackings occurred in waters off Benin, underscoring the challenges of consolidating maritime security gains in the region.

Petro-piracy is linked to broader oil theft and corruption trends; the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) has noted that oil vessels in the Gulf of Guinea “are attacked because there is a booming black market for fuel in West Africa.” UNODC previously found that petro-pirates in West Africa often had links to the Niger Delta, where militants, politicians, security officers, and oil industry personnel have long been implicated in oil theft. EOS Risk Group, a security firm, attributes the 2018 uptick in petro-piracy to rising oil prices, corruption, and the ability of criminal networks to re-sell stolen petroleum.

Figure 2. Piracy/Armed Robbery in the Gulf of Guinea
Actual and Attempted Attacks, IMB figures



Costs of Insecurity in the Gulf of Guinea

Piracy and armed robbery against ships impose significant costs on the shipping industry. The non-governmental One Earth Future Foundation, which tracks annual piracy trends, estimated that maritime insecurity in the region cost \$818.1 million in 2017, up from \$793.7 million in 2016. Stolen goods account for only a small fraction of these costs, the majority of which reflect expenses related to deterring armed attacks on ships (through governmental naval activities and/or privately contracted vessel protection), hazard pay, and insurance costs for ships and cargo.

Countries bordering the Gulf of Guinea incur additional costs, including some intangible costs such as offshore attacks deterring investment. In 2016, a U.S. diplomat at the U.N. estimated that Nigeria may lose \$1.5 billion per month due to piracy, armed robbery at sea, and oil theft. Many Gulf of Guinea countries also derive significant revenues from port activities, and are thus heavily affected when shipping firms reroute vessels in response to insecurity. Amid the 2011-2012 surge in Gulf of Guinea petro-piracy, for instance, UNODC estimates that Benin may have suffered a 28% loss in total government revenue due to a decline in maritime traffic through its major port.

Regional Maritime Security Efforts

In 2014, thirteen coastal West and Central African states launched an Inter-regional Coordination Center (ICC) in Cameroon to foster regional maritime security cooperation and harmonize cross-border legal frameworks. The ICC facilitates skill-sharing and diplomatic and informational exchange between two sub-regional entities: the Regional Center for Maritime Security of West Africa (CRESMAO), based in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, and the Regional Centre for Maritime Security of Central Africa (CRESMAC) in Pointe Noire, Republic of Congo. Operationalization of this architecture is ongoing.

The international community, notably the European Union (EU), has provided support to foster greater interregional maritime security cooperation. Since 2016, the EU has announced more than \$60 million for maritime security capacity building programs in the Gulf of Guinea. Nearly \$30 million supports the implementation of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS)'s Integrated Maritime Strategy, an overarching framework that addresses piracy and armed robbery as well as human and drug trafficking, illegal fishing, oil theft and illicit

resource extraction, and marine environment management, among others. Other EU initiatives include programs to improve coordination of maritime security efforts in Central Africa and reinforce port security throughout the region.

France, the former colonial power in much of the region, has played a leading role in international efforts to improve maritime security in the Gulf of Guinea. France maintains a small, long-term naval deployment in the region and conducts exercises with partner African navies. The U.S. Navy has supported some of these trainings.

U.S. Engagement and Assistance

The United States has launched several foreign assistance initiatives that aim to enhance maritime security capacity and coordination among Gulf of Guinea states. The State Department administers some of this aid on a bilateral basis, notably through the International Military Education and Training (IMET) program, which supports training courses in the United States. The State Department provides further assistance on a regional basis through the Africa Maritime Security Initiative (AMSI), which is funded through the Peacekeeping Operations Account (PKO) and provides training, advisory support, and equipment.

Pursuant to the FY2017 National Defense Authorization Act (P.L. 114-328), DOD is authorized to train and equip foreign militaries for maritime security and related purposes under its consolidated “global train and equip” authority (10 U.S.C. 333). DOD has planned increased resources for such programs in Africa, including in the Gulf of Guinea.

Other DOD-administered assistance centers on the Africa Partnership Station (APS), the primary maritime capacity-building program of U.S. Naval Forces Africa (NAVAF). Through APS, U.S. military personnel conduct engagement activities with African counterparts, other foreign partners in the region, and non-governmental organizations to enhance African countries' capacity to “maintain maritime security within their inland waterways, territorial waters, and exclusive economic zones.” In addition, AFRICOM conducts an annual exercise in the Gulf of Guinea known as Obangame Express. AFRICOM's largest maritime security exercise, it brings together personnel from 20 African navies for training on search and rescue, maritime interdiction, and crisis response, among other areas. AFRICOM provides additional support through the African Maritime Law Enforcement Partnership (AMLEP), a capacity building program in which African naval boarding teams are typically paired with U.S. Coast Guard detachments that act “in an accompany, advise, and assist role” on combined law enforcement operations. Past DOD assistance has also helped build a maritime radar network in the Gulf of Guinea.

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