

Intelligence brief | 19 March 2014

Maritime insecurity in the Gulf of Guinea



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Summary

1. Maritime insecurity incorporates a range of criminal activities, including piracy, smuggling and illegal fishing.
2. The Gulf of Guinea has recently surpassed the more infamous Gulf of Aden as the epicentre of maritime insecurity.
3. It is *likely* that the United States will increase its naval presence in the Gulf of Guinea during 2014.¹
4. It is *likely* that the EU will also participate in an international intervention in the region, though this could *possibly* be stalled.
5. It is *likely* that the international community will push West African countries to legislate for the deployment of armed security guards on their vessels and agree to greater inter-state collaboration.
6. The potential conflict of interests between the international community and shipping companies over armed guards and/or external intervention will *likely* force a consensus approach that will *possibly* fail to address the root of the problem.
7. It is *highly likely* that the above moves will lead to a temporary increase in violence in the region.
8. As such, maritime insecurity in the region is *likely* to increase throughout 2014, and Benin, Togo and Guinea-Bissau, in particular, are *likely* to witness an increase in criminal activities across their territorial waters.



Fig. 1. Map of West Africa and the Gulf of Guinea. (Copyright © Google, 2014.)

¹ See <http://www.openbriefing.org/intelligenceunit/intelligencemethod/> for an explanation of the words of estimative probability used by Open Briefing.

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A regional problem with global implications

Maritime insecurity incorporates a range of criminal activities, including piracy, smuggling and illegal fishing. The Gulf of Guinea, off the south coast of West Africa, has recently surpassed the more infamous Gulf of Aden, off the coast of Somalia in East Africa, as the epicentre of maritime insecurity. It is estimated that such insecurity costs regional economies \$2 billion annually.²

The Gulf of Guinea is a strategic global trade route through which around 30,000 commercial vessels travel every year. The area provides an economic lifeline to both coastal and land-locked countries in West Africa, which use it to export their economic outputs, such as minerals, timber and agricultural produce. It is an area through which top African oil producers – such as Nigeria, Angola and Equatorial Guinea – ship their crude on to international markets. Furthermore, the Atlantic coast of West Africa, from Senegal to Angola, is a centre of new discoveries of oil and gas reserves, making the region extremely attractive to international trade.

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High levels of piracy in the Gulf of Guinea have resulted in increasing international insurance rates – Nigeria and Benin, for example, are now in the same risk category as Somalia – and other trade-related costs, which in turn decreases marine traffic and reduces tax revenues. Benin, in particular, is a good example: taxes on trade account for half of Benin's government revenue, 80% of which come from the port of Cotonou, whose activities contribute almost 70% of the country's GDP. Overall, a decrease in marine traffic, borne out of insecurity and higher insurance costs, resulted in a 28% loss in Benin's government revenue in 2012.³

The Gulf of Guinea is also a hotspot for illegal trade, particularly of drugs and small arms. Drug trafficking and arms smuggling are led by militant groups from the coastal areas across to the Sahel, creating greater insecurity in regions already highly vulnerable to destabilisation. These highly profitable activities undermine democracy and the rule of law in countries where poverty is rampant and the forces of law and order subject to corruption. Guinea Bissau is the best example of the destabilising effect of drug trafficking. In this case, complicity goes as far as the highest ranks in the country's government and armed forces.

The impact of illegal fishing is often disregarded and underestimated, but it remains a critical element of maritime insecurity. It is estimated that nearly 40% of the fish caught in West African waters is taken illegally. Although this provides millions of dollars to European and Asian fishing fleets, it affects people's livelihoods by damaging the maritime environment and undermining local fishing businesses that provide sustenance and employment for a large swathe of the region's population.

² <http://www.defenceiq.com/naval-and-maritime-defence/articles/piracy-storm-brews-in-west-africa-gulf-of-guinea-u/>

³ <http://www.un.org/africarenewal/magazine/december-2013/piracy-west-africa>

Maritime piracy costs the global economy about \$18 billion a year according to the World Bank.⁴ The West is particularly exposed: 40% of Europe's oil imports, and close to 30% of the United States', transit the area each year. European businesses are affected, since 90% of the cost of implementing security and of circumnavigating along alternative routes comes out of the shipping industry's budget.⁵ Disruption to trade in the region also results in higher prices for consumers.

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The drivers of maritime insecurity

Piracy off the Somali coast has its root causes in weak government control over the state, a lack of legal economic opportunities and the absence of the rule of law. In the absence of more sustainable alternatives, international naval patrolling was stepped up in order to tackle the problem. As a result, pirate attacks dropped by 80% between 2010 and 2012,⁶ though this required a major allocation of resources. In West Africa, the destruction of peoples' livelihoods, unemployment, widespread corruption and political and social instability also drive people to search for alternative means of sustenance. As such, maritime insecurity in the Gulf of Guinea has fertile ground in West African states upon which to grow.

Most piracy attacks in the region take place in Nigerian territorial waters. It can be argued that maritime insecurity in the Gulf of Guinea initially had its epicentre in the oil-rich Niger Delta. Lack of benefits derived from oil profits, deteriorating livelihoods, a culture of lawlessness, and collusion of state authorities with criminal networks, translated into criminal activities, oil-theft in particular. Oil theft – whether on land (oil-bunkering) or at sea – is attractive because of a booming black market for fuel. It is worth noting that the process of hijacking tankers, syphoning off oil, and selling it on the black market is costly and requires high-quality logistics, which indicates that it is linked to local elites.

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Illicit trade is driven by instability in West Africa, primarily in the Sahel. Insurgent movements and terrorist organisations, such as al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), rely on drug trafficking and arms smuggling to finance their activities and operate in the region.

Illegal fishing is attractive due to the ease of access to rich sources of fish, mostly a result of lack of surveillance and state control over territorial seas, which is derived not only from inefficient security resources but also from corrupt relationships between navies or coast guards and illegal fishing vessels.

⁴ <http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2013/11/01/pirate-trails-tracks-dirty-money-resulting-from-piracy-off-the-horn-of-africa>

⁵ http://www.iss.europa.eu/uploads/media/Brief_20.pdf

⁶ <http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Research/Files/Reports/2014/foresight%20africa%202014/02%20foresight%20piracy%20somalia%20felbab%20brown.pdf>

Challenges and responses

A lack of cooperation, surveillance and information sharing between West African countries remains at the core of the region's inability to tackle maritime insecurity. For years, governments have given priority to the reinforcement of land forces in order to tackle national and regional insecurity. The result was the neglect of maritime security forces, culminating in underfunded and unprepared coast guard and other law enforcement institutions. Furthermore, different national legislations often do not allow, or complicate, the deployment of armed guards on vessels or the intervention of international naval forces. Also relevant is the fact that some local elites are closely linked to and benefit from criminal activities, thus they are not welcoming of an intensive security presence in their territorial waters.

However, an international and regional response, similar to the one implemented in the Gulf of Aden, seems to be in the making. In June 2013, government representatives from the member states of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) and the Gulf of Guinea Commission (GGC) met in Cameroon's capital, Yaoundé, in order to discuss maritime insecurity along the Gulf of Guinea. The summit culminated in the signing of a 'Code of conduct concerning the repression of piracy, armed robbery against ships and illicit maritime activity in west and central Africa', which focuses on information sharing, deterring illicit maritime activities, prosecution-related issues, and promoting relevant national legislation.⁷

An international and regional response seems to be in the making.

Ghana has already taken concrete steps towards addressing the problem. It has taken a firm stance against corruption within the government, piloted an information-sharing centre for the region, and established heavy surveillance in its territorial waters. These actions have proven to be largely effective, particularly considering that recent oil and gas findings in Ghana could be a major attraction for piracy. Building on these positive developments, it was agreed that a permanent information-sharing centre would be set up in the Ghanaian capital, Accra, in 2014.

In December 2013, EU institutions issued a joint communication on maritime insecurity in the Gulf of Guinea with the aim of assessing the scale of the threat, the risks it poses to regional states and the EU, and how to help tackle the problem.⁸ The subject is to be discussed at the April 2014 Africa-EU summit in Brussels. The US Africa Command (Africom) is assessing attacks on US-flagged ships and the threat that maritime insecurity poses to the US economy. Africom is supporting improvements in regional maritime capacity, mainly through joint exercises, and is also considering an increase in the US military presence off the coast of West Africa.

If such international and regional responses are to be truly effective they will need to be complemented by increased on-land efforts to address the root causes of maritime insecurity. Such efforts will need to go beyond additional security measures and increased militarisation and encompass sustainable measures to tackling socio-economic deprivation and local corruption.

⁷ http://www.ecowas.int/publications/en/maritime_security/code_of_conduct.pdf

⁸ <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=JOIN:2013:0031:FIN:EN:PDF>

Forecast for 2014

2014 will almost certainly prove a turning point for maritime insecurity in the Gulf of Guinea. The risk it poses to both regional and world trade is immense. Piracy, illegal fishing and trafficking also serve to feed militancy and radicalism, hence contributing towards further social and political instability in the region. It is vital to safeguard the normal flow of trade and guarantee regional and international security.

The rise of insurance costs for shipping companies, the danger posed to Westerners, and the unpreparedness of West African navies, creates a growing consensus among governments and civil society over the need to intervene in the Gulf of Guinea. It is therefore *likely* that the United States will increase its naval presence in the region. It is also *likely* that the EU will participate in an international intervention, with a few countries providing physical and financial resources. However, the deployment could *possibly* be stalled because several EU countries have already allocated significant resources to the Gulf of Aden and fear overstretch by being drawn into another major naval operation in Africa.

2014 will almost certainly prove a turning point for maritime insecurity in the Gulf of Guinea.

It is therefore *likely* that the West will push West African countries to legislate for the deployment of armed security guards on their vessels and agree to greater inter-state collaboration. Private military and security companies will come at a significant cost, and the potential conflict of interests between the international community and shipping companies over armed guards and/or external intervention will *likely* force a consensus approach that will *possibly* fail to address the root of the problem.

It is *highly likely* that this will lead to a temporary increase in violence, since pirates in the Gulf of Guinea have proven to be bold and well-armed. As such, maritime insecurity in the region is *likely* to increase throughout 2014, and Benin, Togo and Guinea-Bissau, in particular, are *likely* to witness an increase in criminal activities across their territorial waters.

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