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Ten things you should know about piracy in West Africa

1. There are various types of maritime crime in West Africa; generally, only two of these can be considered as piracy – ‘hijack for cargo theft’ and ‘kidnap for ransom’.
2. Hijack for cargo theft has traditionally been concentrated in the Bight of Benin (particularly the Lagos/Cotonou/Lome area) but has occurred further west (the Ivory Coast) and further south-east (Gabon).
3. Kidnap for ransom has traditionally been concentrated in the Bight of Bonny, south of the Niger Delta region. However, some other areas, such as offshore Cameroon and Equatorial Guinea, have witnessed maritime kidnapping.
4. Kidnap for ransom pre-dates both hijack for cargo theft (December 2010 onwards) and the upsurge in Somali piracy (end of 2007 onwards). It is less sophisticated than hijack for cargo theft and is typically linked to the criminal gangs that evolved out of militant groups in the Niger Delta. Stationary/slow-moving vessels and platforms are at most risk. Ransoms paid are often in the region of \$60-150,000 USD, depending on how many crew have been hijacked, their nationalities, and the criminal gangs involved.
5. Pirates intent on hijack for cargo theft target tankers loaded with petroleum product cargoes that can easily be sold in the West African black-market, particularly in Nigeria. Prized cargoes are gasoline, gas oil and aviation fuel, and typically 3-8,000 mt is stolen (worth about \$1,000 USD per mt). The pirates themselves are the tip of an iceberg that is a sophisticated organised crime network based in Nigeria, which can leverage maritime expertise, illegal lighter vessels, storage and distribution, and money laundering facilities.
6. In the case of hijack for cargo theft, the pirates and organised criminal networks behind them have access to specific intelligence, including the name and location of the target vessel, and the type of cargo it is loaded with. In some cases it is likely that corrupt individuals involved with supporting local tanker operations (such as STS) pass specific intelligence to the pirates. The pirates will usually attack when the vessel is most vulnerable: at night and either while drifting, at anchor or conducting STS. The pirates gain access using ladders and hooked wooden poles, which can also be used to pull away weakly erected razor wire. They sometimes use violence against the crew.

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7. West African piracy is different to Somali piracy. In many cases, guidance in BMP 4 is not applicable to West Africa. For example, the threat to a tanker conducting STS in the Bight of Benin is different to the threat to the same tanker transiting the Indian Ocean, as are the appropriate counter-measures. Thus, Masters in West Africa must understand the specific threat(s) faced by their vessel, how their vessel operations might make them vulnerable, and the counter-measures that will actually reduce the risk while still allowing shipping operations to continue.

8. Some acts of piracy in West Africa are a mutation of other types of maritime crime. For example, criminals have hijacked crew having originally intended to rob the vessel or steal cargo. Additionally, some vessels might have been hijacked by criminals who were initially engaged in fraud or black-market activities with the crew.

9. Armed guarding options available in West Africa are limited and uncertain, compared to those available in the Indian Ocean. An owner has many factors to consider when deciding whether armed guards are appropriate: legal, insurance, flag state, the vulnerability of the vessel and crew, and the quality of the company employed to provide the service, to name but a few. In practical terms, there are concerns over the reliability and capability of some armed guards in the region. Furthermore, given that many of the armed guards would inevitably have to be police or navy personnel, there is some concern about the actions the relevant state might take against the owner/vessel/crew, should it feel that there is a case to answer for any incident that has occurred (e.g. a crew member injures an armed security guard or vice-versa).

10. It is often more difficult to communicate a threat incident to local security forces in the region than it is to naval forces operating against Somali pirates in the Indian Ocean and Gulf of Aden. In some cases, even if the Master or CSO has contacted local security forces, they have been unwilling or unable to assist (for example, stating that their patrol vessels have limited range or asking for a payment to 'hire' assets, such as a patrol vessel or aeroplane).

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ABOUT GRAY PAGE

Established in 2003, Gray Page is a specialist maritime consulting group that solves problems around the world for organisations operating in the international shipping market.

Gray Page provides investigative, intelligence and risk management services. These include: investigating cargo theft, losses, damage, disappearances and fraud; tracing assets, vessels and witnesses; as well as providing intelligence, risk management and asset protection expertise.

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