



RiskIntelligence



# Security Considerations for Tanker Operators in the Gulf of Guinea

[Update August 2020]

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## Executive summary

Frequent attacks against merchant ships in the Gulf of Guinea, often involving tankers, are a problem for tanker operators. Risk Intelligence has recorded more than 60 maritime security incidents across the region in 2020 to date, around one third of those involved tanker vessels of all types. Several kidnappings of crew members from product tankers, including attacks at significant distances from the coastline, have highlighted the problem once again. The threat level for tanker operations in the Gulf of Guinea remains significant.

At the same time, threat levels vary across the region. Violent attacks, particularly those aimed at kidnapping crew members for financial reward, are largely concentrated on areas in geographic proximity to the Niger Delta, even though neighbouring countries have been affected on several occasions in recent months. Without a determined effort by governments and security forces across the region, kidnap-for-ransom attacks are likely to remain a threat for operations in the Gulf of Guinea in the next 12 to 24 months.

Threat and risk assessments are therefore extremely important to identify mitigation measures and reduce the risks for crews, cargoes and ships. At the same time, such assessments are complicated by a constantly evolving situation which can change significantly within just a few weeks, depending on factors such as weather, changes in traffic patterns or naval operations as well as the general security situation ashore in Nigeria.

## Recommendations

Implementation of measures contained in the 'BMP West Africa' guidance decreases the chance that attackers are able to board a vessel at sea. Furthermore, ships that report to MDAT-GoG or to centres in the region as per the reporting procedures are more likely to receive assistance in case of an attack. Additional measures, e.g. the use of security escort vessels for transits to and from Nigerian ports and terminals, may be considered, based on a thorough risk assessment that includes the current threat level, the vulnerability of a particular vessel and the potential consequences of a successful attack.

Companies should also evaluate and – if required – update contingency plans, instructions for masters and emergency guidelines to reduce the risks to crews, ships and cargoes as much as possible.

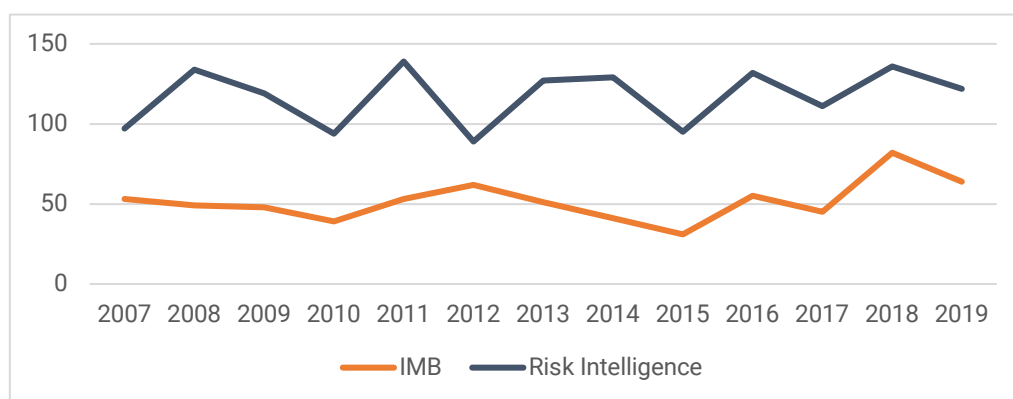
## General background

In July, the IMB's Piracy Reporting Centre presented their report about piracy and robbery at sea for the first half of 2020. The Gulf of Guinea was once again highlighted as an area of particular concern. According to the report, an increasing number of crew members was kidnapped between January and June while attacks are taking place further out to sea.

Merely based on recent media headlines, many ship operators are likely to agree with both of these claims. In reality, however, the situation is much more complex. Many attacks that are reported as piracy can be linked to other criminal activities. At the same time, regional governments are increasingly willing to address these problems, but navies and other maritime law enforcement agencies remain hampered by a lack of financial and human resources.

By and large, the lack of maritime security in the Gulf of Guinea, the waters off countries from Côte d'Ivoire to Gabon, has long been a concern. The shipping industry in general and tanker operators in particular have been increasingly aware of these issues in recent years. In June and July, for example, crew members were kidnapped from a fishing trawler, a general cargo vessel, an FPSO and a product tanker, the latter at a distance of more than 200 nm from the Niger Delta. While all of these cases were covered in many media reports, the individual circumstances – and potential links to other illicit activities – were not analysed in detail.

Moreover, even such high-profile incidents should be placed in a broader context which shows that the overall situation in the Gulf of Guinea has changed little in the long-term view. Accurate figures for illicit activities, however, are virtually impossible to calculate. Even databases that are solely concerned with piracy and armed robbery at sea vary significantly due to different reporting standards and methodologies. These variations are highlighted in Figure 1.



**Figure 1:** Annual number of security incidents in West Africa (Senegal to Angola) as recorded by Risk Intelligence and the International Maritime Bureau (IMB).

Figures included in the IMB's annual reports suggest that 2018 and 2019 were the years with the highest number of attacks since 2007. These figures, however, only include attacks that are officially reported, based on a limited number of potential sources. While that allows for a

*Under-reporting of security incidents to relevant authorities has been a problem for many years, affecting the quality of available figures.*

comparison over many years, the IMB has often identified under-reporting as an issue.

There are many potential reasons for ship operators not to report security incidents. Shipping companies may have concerns about

their own reputation or about potential liability, they may also believe that a response by responsible authorities is unlikely to be forthcoming. Moreover, investigations caused by an official report can lead to operational delays and therefore to added costs which are not reimbursed by insurers or charterers. INTERTANKO encourages operators to report all types of security incidents to ensure an accurate overview of current and developing threats.<sup>1</sup>

In comparison, private companies can provide a more accurate picture of the actual situation. Based on a broad range of sources, Risk Intelligence has collected between 80 and 140 reports per year in West Africa since 2007. The number of security incidents in 2019 and the first half of 2020 was within this long-term average. While these numbers include incidents ranging from attempted thefts to extremely violent attacks, the number of high-profile kidnap-for-ransom attacks in 2019 or 2020 to date was also similar to previous years.

*Situational awareness and various mitigation measures can reduce the risk of trading in the Gulf of Guinea significantly.*

Looking at the types of attacks included in Figure 1 is important as well. In many countries across West and Central Africa, tanker operators mainly face petty thefts from ships at berth or at anchor. Violence against crew members is very unlikely during such small-scale attacks, as perpetrators generally try to escape when they are detected by the crew.

Violent attacks, particularly with the aim to kidnap crew members, are concentrated in geographic proximity to the Niger Delta. In this part of Nigeria, kidnappings on land have been a problem for many years. Taking hostages and collecting ransoms is a lucrative business model that requires at least some infrastructure such as holding camps, foot soldiers and experienced negotiators. All these can be found in the Niger Delta where seafarer kidnappings are an extension of a land-based security threat.

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<sup>1</sup> Further information about reporting procedures and contact points can be found in the 'BMP West Africa' guidance, published in March 2020.



For tanker operators, this has two important implications:

- Without a determined effort by the Nigerian authorities, the current situation is unlikely to change significantly in the next 12 to 24 months. Kidnap-for-ransom attacks are very likely to remain a threat for operations in the Gulf of Guinea, especially in proximity to the Niger Delta.
- General guidance regarding mitigation measures is important, but these measures should be supplemented by comprehensive threat and/or risk assessments for specific vessels and voyages. Contingency plans – on the vessel and the company level – should be regularly assessed and updated.

Shipping companies can mitigate risks related to operations in the Gulf of Guinea significantly, even though they are individually unable to influence the overall threat of attacks against ships. Awareness about current events, strict adherence to security procedures and a combination of mitigation measures are therefore extremely important.

## Evolving threat

As mentioned above, threat and risk assessments are extremely important to identify relevant mitigation measures and to reduce the risks for crews, cargoes and ships. At the same time, such assessments are complicated by a constantly evolving threat situation in the Gulf of Guinea which can change significantly within just a few weeks, depending on factors such as weather conditions, changes in traffic patterns or naval operations as well as the general security situation ashore in Nigeria. That includes local issues such as relations between companies involved in the oil and gas sector as well as communities where exploration and production activities are taking place.

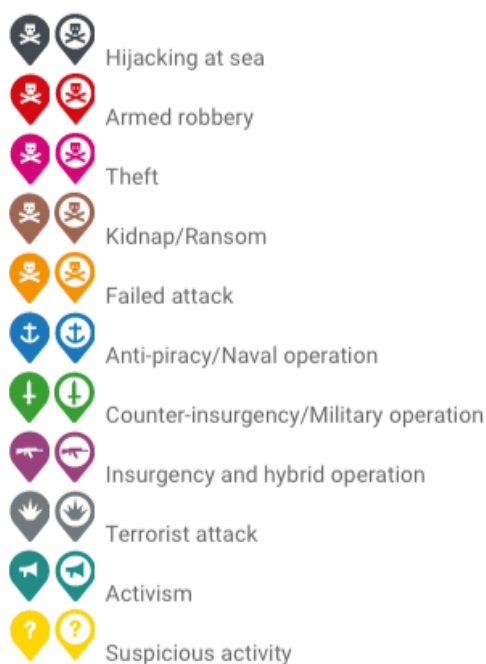
### *Seasonal variations*

The distribution of attacks against vessels in the Gulf of Guinea shows significant differences between the rainy season and the dry season in the Niger Delta. The rainy season roughly lasts from April to September. By and large, sea conditions during this period often make it very complicated – or even impossible – to operate small boats at significant distances from the coastline. The number of attacks against merchant ships deep offshore is therefore reduced during the rainy season.

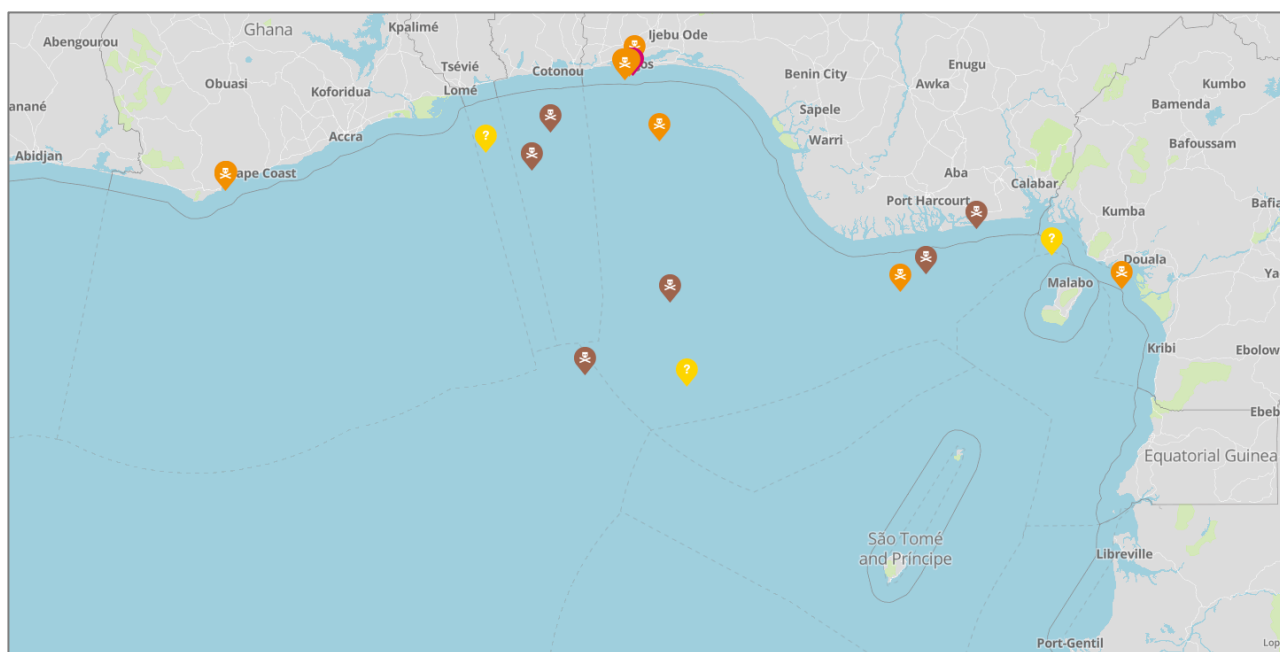
However, spells of good weather are possible during the entire period from April to September and so attacks cannot be ruled out. Overall, threats to operations remain significant even during the rainy season, yet attacks at distances of more than 30 nm from the Niger Delta coastline are significantly more likely during the dry season, i.e. between October and March. This general pattern has been constant in recent years and is unlikely to change in the near future.

The distribution of attacks against tanker vessels of all types – including one attack against an FPSO off Nigeria – in 2020 to date is shown in Figure 3. This timeframe includes three months of the dry season at the beginning of the year as well as the current rainy season, highlighting that a simple annual comparison can be somewhat misleading.

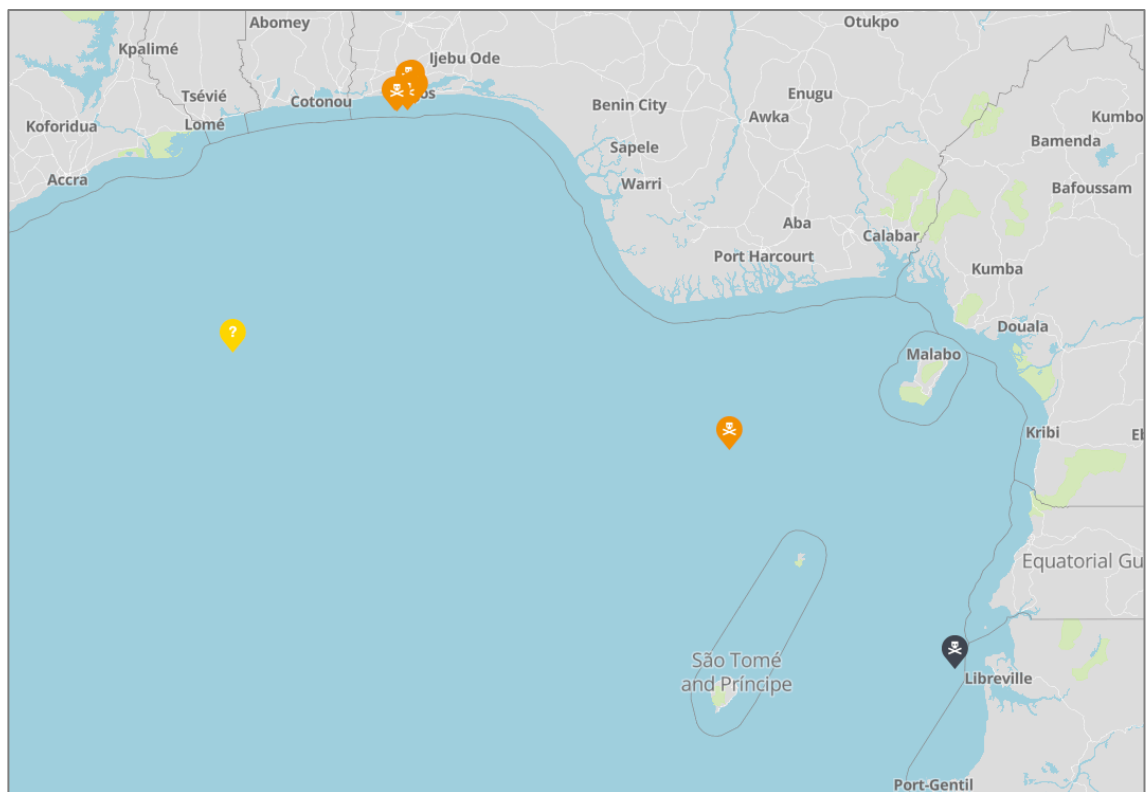
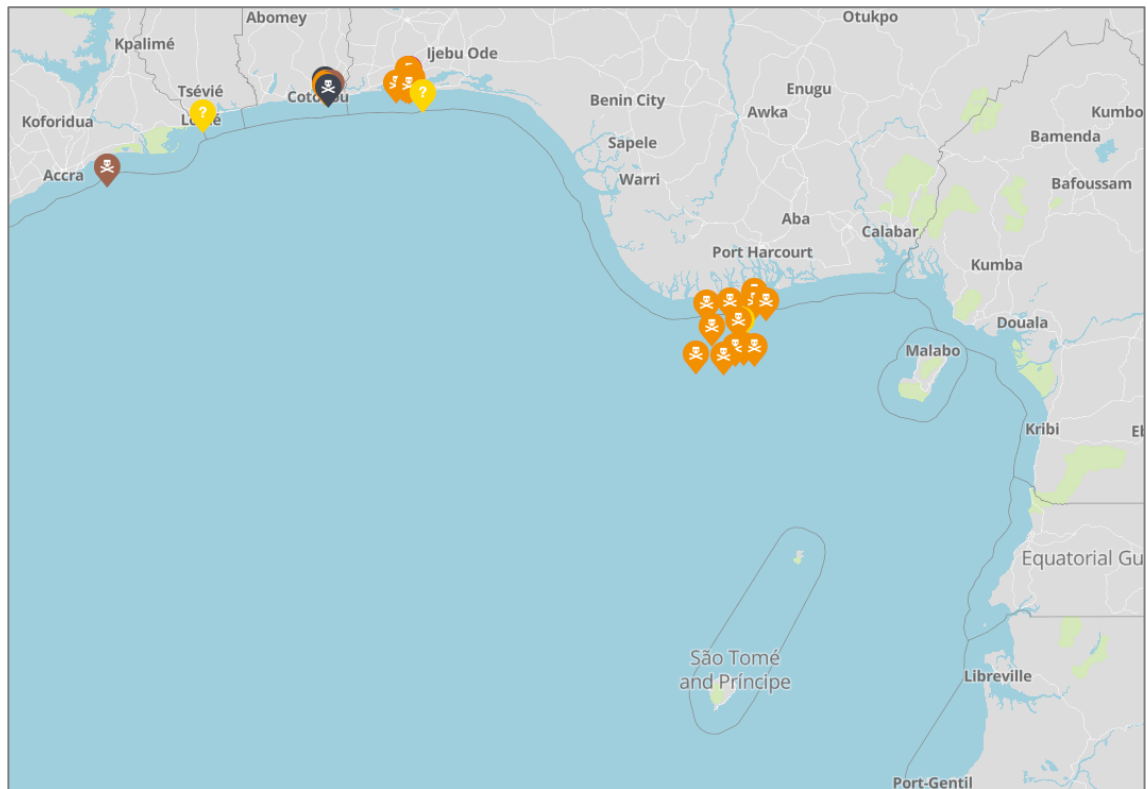
The overall evolution of the threat between October 2017 and August 2020 – with a specific look at incidents involving tankers of all types – is illustrated in Figures 4 to 9. These maps underline the significant differences in attack patterns between the rainy season and the dry season. Furthermore, the maps show that 'hotspots' for attacks are shifting over time. Incident icons are explained in Figure 2.



**Figure 2:** Explanation for icons shown in Figures 3 to 9 below.

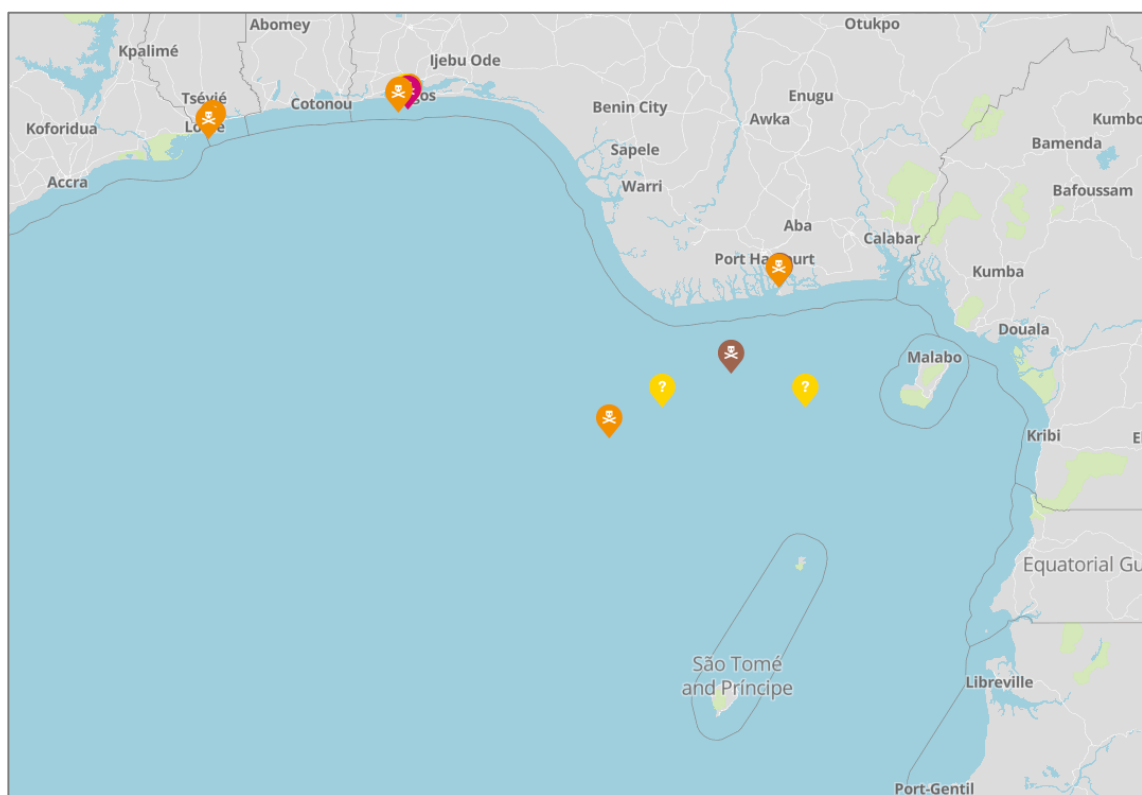
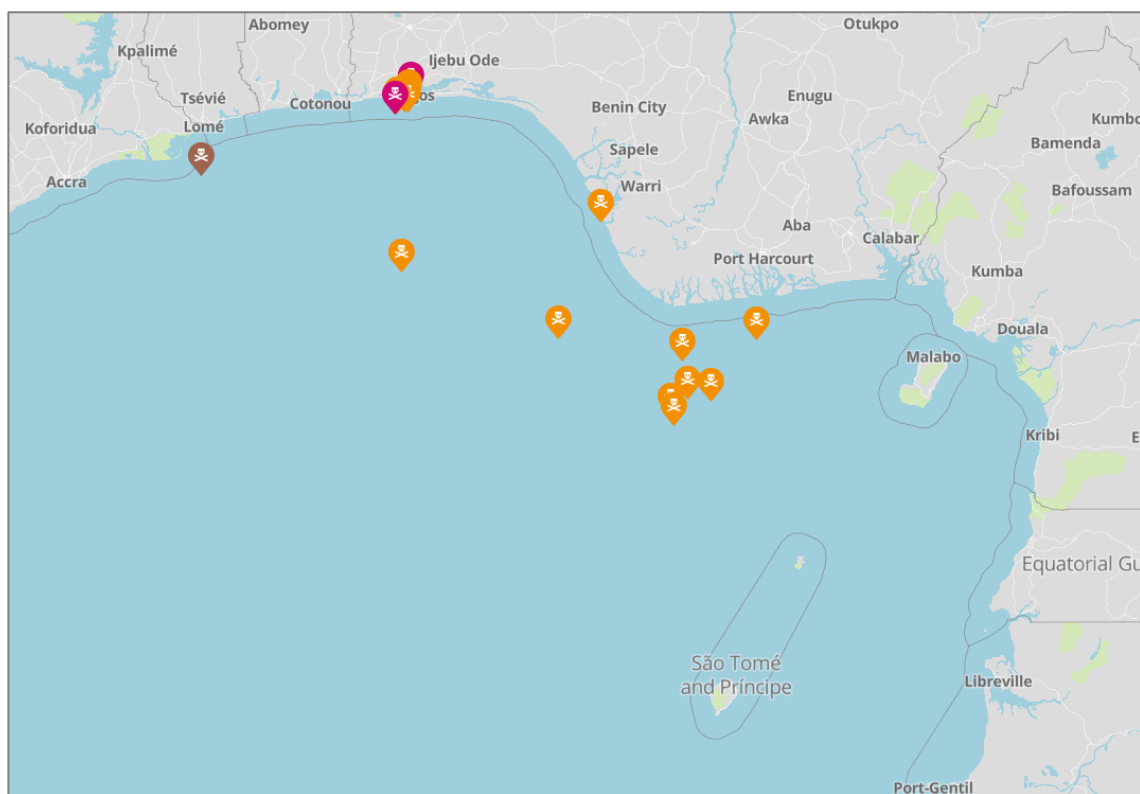


**Figure 3:** Maritime security incidents in the Gulf of Guinea, involving all types of tanker vessels – including an attack against an FPSO off Nigeria – between 1 January and 20 August 2020 (Source: Risk Intelligence System). Exclusive Economic Zones are indicated by dotted lines and territorial waters by solid lines. Some of these boundaries are disputed.

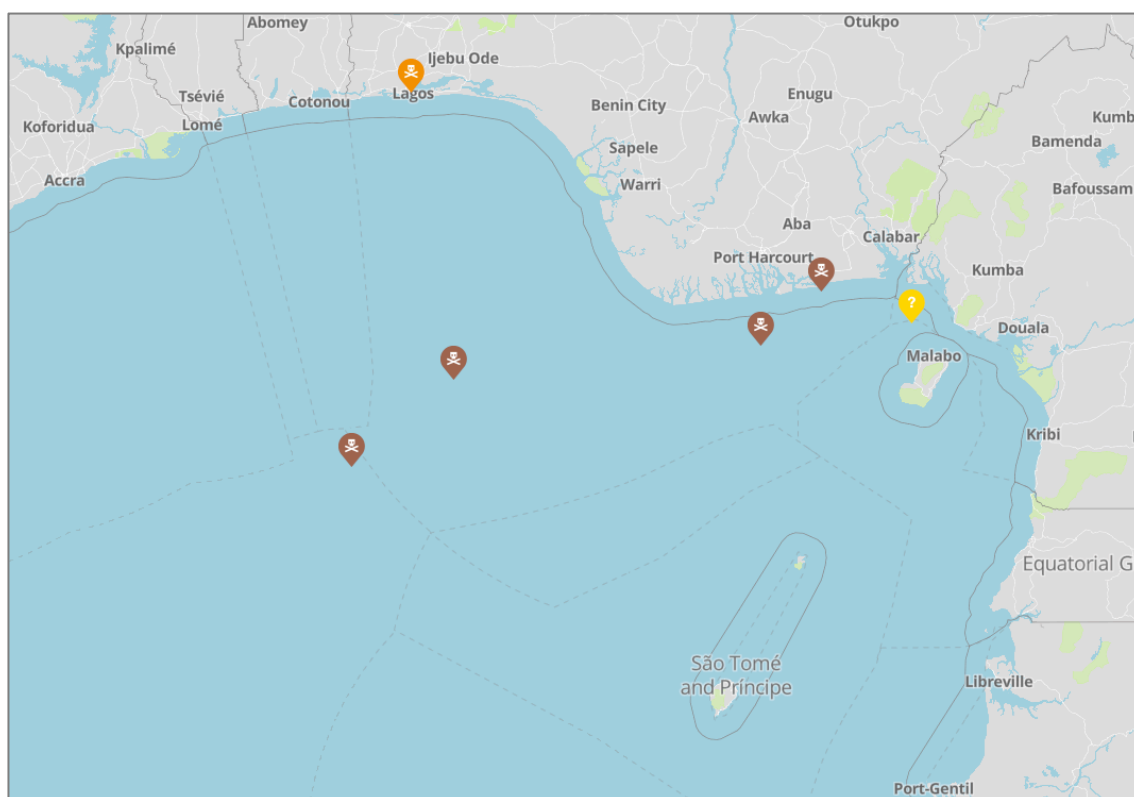
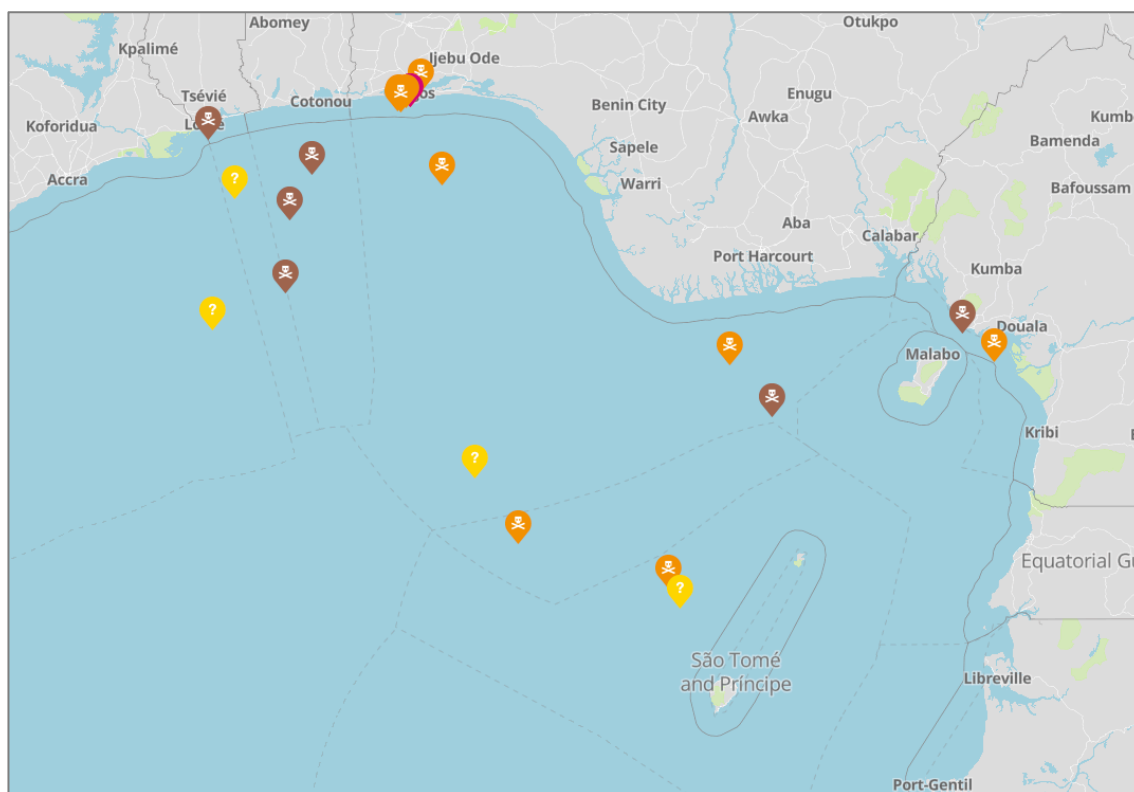


**Figures 4 and 5:** Maritime security incidents involving tanker vessels between 1 October 2017 and 31 March 2018 (top) and between 1 April and 30 September 2018 (bottom) (Source: Risk Intelligence System).





**Figures 6 and 7:** Maritime security incidents involving tanker vessels between 1 October 2018 and 31 March 2019 (top) and between 1 April and 30 September 2019 (bottom) (Source: Risk Intelligence System).

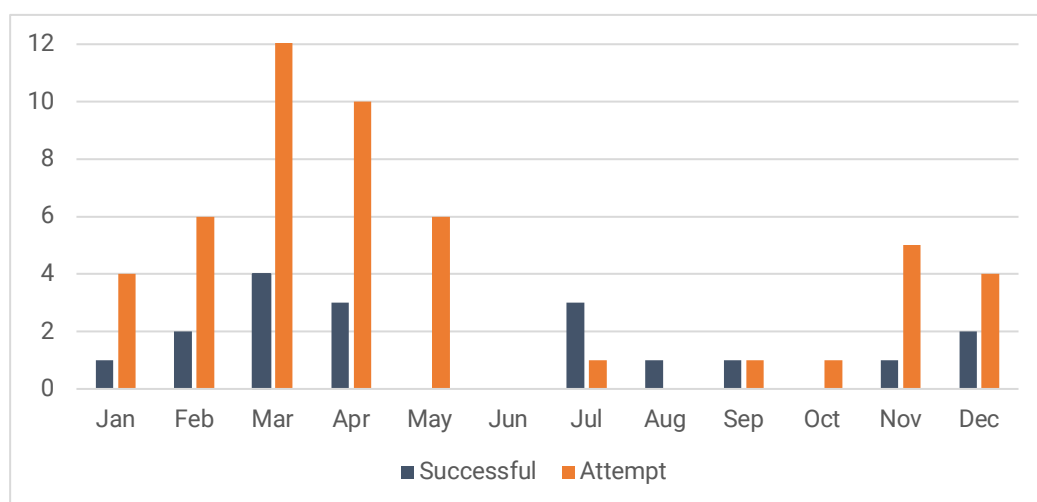


**Figures 8 and 9:** Maritime security incidents involving tanker vessels between 1 October 2019 and 31 March 2020 (top) and between 1 April and 20 August 2020 (bottom) (Source: Risk Intelligence System).

As mentioned above, the maps highlight seasonal variations as well as changing 'hotspots' for attacks against tankers in the Gulf of Guinea. These changes are linked to factors such as changes in maritime traffic patterns or law enforcement operations at sea, but also to the overall security situation on land across the Niger Delta. For attacks off Nigeria, two important differences should also be noted:

- Small-scale attacks against ships at berth in or at anchor off Lagos are relatively frequent and not dependent on the season, yet violence against crew members is rare. No kidnappings of seafarers have occurred in the immediate vicinity of the port facilities in Lagos. Perpetrators usually target product tankers, trying to steal refined products often using crude methods for sale in local markets. They are likely to escape upon discovery by the crew by rapidly disembarking or simply jumping into the water.
- Violent attacks, generally with the aim to kidnap crew members, are centred off the Niger Delta. Main areas of concern have constantly shifted in recent years, highlighted by a cluster of attacks south of Bonny in late 2017 and early 2018 (Figure 4) and a subsequent shift to an area off Bayelsa state in late 2018 (Figure 6). Since late 2019, an increasing number of kidnap-for-ransom attacks has also been reported in neighbouring countries, believed to be conducted by Niger Delta-based groups. All seafarers taken as hostages over the past years were released in the Niger Delta.

Overall, 69 successful or failed kidnap-for-ransom attacks against tanker vessels in the Gulf of Guinea were recorded by Risk Intelligence between January 2016 and August 2020. During 20 successful attacks, 133 seafarers were kidnapped from tanker vessels over this period. Figure 10 shows the distribution of attacks by month.

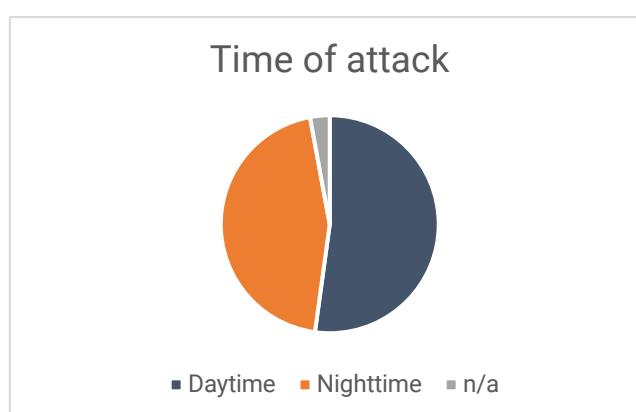


**Figure 10:** Successful and attempted kidnap-for-ransom attacks against tanker vessels between 1 January 2016 and 20 August 2020 (Source: Risk Intelligence System).

Once again, Figure 10 highlights seasonal variations for attacks against merchant ships. More than 60% of incidents have been recorded between October and March and most incidents recorded during April and May took place during spells of good weather in 2016.

### *Time of attacks*

Regarding the time of day, perpetrators do not have a preference for attacks during the day or at night, shown in Figure 11.



**Figure 11:** Time of attack for successful and failed kidnap-for-ransom attacks against tanker vessels between 1 January 2016 and 20 August 2020 (Source: Risk Intelligence System).

Out of 69 successful or failed attacks against tanker vessels of all types that were reported between January 2016 and August 2020, slightly more incidents took place during daytime. Conducting the same analysis by including other ship types shows a very similar picture. However, attacks at night are significantly more likely to result in the kidnapping of crew members, shown in Figure 12.



**Figure 12:** Successful and attempted kidnap-for-ransom attacks against tanker vessels between 1 January 2016 and 20 August 2020 (Source: Risk Intelligence System).

The fact that the success rate of attackers is significantly higher at night can largely be attributed to the fact that crew members are more likely to detect hostile speedboats relatively early during the day, allowing for more time to increase speed and conduct evasive manoeuvres while assembling in the citadel.

As the Nigerian government has started to increase the response capacities of military and civilian agencies, perpetrators are unlikely to be allowed much time on a ship, meaning that it is unlikely for them to have enough time to breach the citadel. Even after a successful boarding,

*Crew vigilance, regular security drills and alerting authorities to attacks are vital to ensure that mitigation measures are effective.*

attackers have escaped without any hostages on several occasions in recent years when they observed an approaching naval vessel.

Overall, this highlights the importance of crew vigilance, regular security drills and alerting authorities to attacks to ensure that other mitigation measures are really effective. The crew on any vessel that is attacked should therefore make an immediate distress call in order to alert relevant authorities.

### *Modus operandi*

Successful and attempted kidnap-for-ransom attacks against tanker vessels have been frequent since 2016. Niger Delta-based groups have no preferred targets, yet tankers of all types represent a large percentage of maritime traffic off the Niger Delta, meaning that the high number of attacks is not disproportionate. Due to low freeboard and limited speed, small product tankers are more likely to be successfully boarded, but other types – including LNG tankers in ballast – have also been attacked.

*Successful and attempted kidnap-for-ransom attacks against tanker vessels of all types have been frequent since 2016.*

The modus operandi of Niger Delta-based attackers is relatively simple. They often use one speedboat, in some cases two speedboats, to approach and board the target vessel by attaching long ladders to the railing. In some cases, the use of mother ships has been reported to extend the range of speedboats used by the perpetrators.

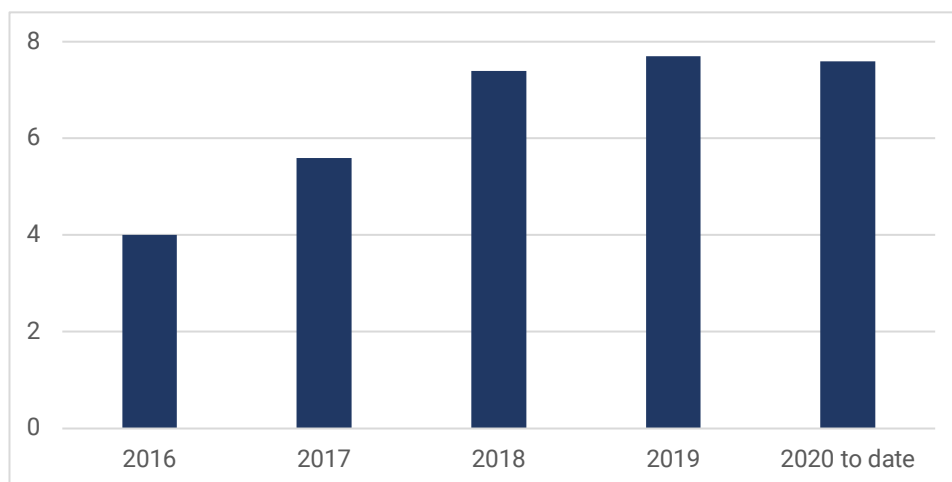
During most attacks, it was later reported that shots had been fired at the bridge and the superstructure. For genuine attacks, it is unlikely that vessels are targeted based on insider information regarding the cargo or the route. The attackers are seeking to kidnap seafarers and so the cargo or the route is not relevant.



Attacks are usually carried out on the spot, meaning that clusters with two or more incidents in the same area over a period of up to 48 hours are possible after unsuccessful attacks. Immediate reporting of such incidents is therefore vital to ensure that other vessels in the vicinity can be warned. Due to this it is vital that alerts are given for vessels attacked and all vessels must be alert to such warning messages.

When seafarers are taken as hostages, they are very likely to be held in a camp located along one of the many creeks in the Niger Delta. These camps are often located in Bayelsa state, but may also be found in other Nigerian states such as Delta, Rivers or Akwa Ibom. Negotiations for the release of the hostages usually last between four and eight weeks. The relatively quick release of hostages is necessary as these have to be protected from law enforcement operations and rival criminal groups.

As kidnappings have become more and more widespread across the Niger Delta over the past decade, the number of hostages that can be held by individual groups has increased. This trend can be identified on land as well as at sea. On average, more crew members are therefore now kidnapped during successful attacks than in the past, highlighted in Figure 13.



**Figure 13:** Average number of seafarers taken as hostages during successful attacks against merchant vessels between 2016 and 2020; figures for 2020 are accurate as of 20 August (Source: Risk Intelligence System).

Figure 13 shows that only four seafarers were taken as hostages in successful attacks against all types of merchant ships in 2016. These were often key personnel such as masters, chief engineers or other officers. This number has almost doubled for attacks since 2018, leading to higher ransom payments which are likely to fuel this vicious cycle as kidnap-for-ransom operations remain extremely lucrative for organised criminal groups.

## Current trends

All issues mentioned in the previous section are likely to remain a problem for tanker operators – as well as for other types of ships – in the coming 12 to 24 months. Despite various efforts across the region that are ongoing, significant improvements should not be expected within just a few weeks or months. It is therefore particularly important to maintain an appropriate level of situational awareness and to implement mitigation measures. The most important document in this context is the 'BMP West Africa' guidance, published in March 2020.

*In recent years, more and more security vessels have been tasked to escort merchant ships to and from Nigerian ports and terminals.*

At the same time, crews on vessels operating in the Gulf of Guinea should be provided with realistic assessments. It is important to note that regional navies – and especially the Nigerian Navy – have responded to an increasing number of incidents in recent years. On several occasions,

approaching naval vessels have prompted attackers to escape even after a successful boarding as all crew members had assembled in the citadel. While a successful boarding remains a traumatic experience for all seafarers, a failed attack is certainly a much more favourable outcome compared with the actual kidnapping of crew members.

### *Initiatives to improve the situation*

Over the past few years, navies throughout the Gulf of Guinea have become increasingly active in addressing maritime security challenges, albeit from a very low baseline. The Nigerian Navy in particular is now engaged in addressing all types of illegal activities – including piracy – throughout Nigeria's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). That was most recently highlighted by the naval operation Okun Alafia II, launched in late July.

Moreover, a naval boarding team freed the fishing vessel HAI LU FENG 11 south of Lagos in May after the vessel had allegedly been hijacked off Abidjan. Ten suspects were detained who are currently facing judicial action based on Nigeria's new anti-piracy law. In August, three men were already convicted under the new law by the Federal High Court in Port Harcourt. They had been involved in the facilitation of ransom payments for three crew members who had been kidnapped from the passenger vessel ELOBEY VI in March.

*In August, the first three men were convicted under Nigeria's new anti-piracy law by a Federal High Court in Port Harcourt.*

At the same time, the Nigerian Navy continues to face severe resource constraints, and the military overall is tasked with countering several security challenges across Nigeria. The situation is likely to become even worse in the coming months, due to the impact of low oil prices and the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the domestic economy.

*Cooperation between the Nigerian Navy and NIMASA has improved significantly since 2018.*

At the same time, cooperation between the Nigerian Navy and civilian authorities led by the Nigerian Maritime Administration and Safety Agency (NIMASA) has improved significantly since 2018. NIMASA is also the lead agency for the Deep Blue project which is currently being implemented. In cooperation with the Nigerian

Navy, this project is supposed to allow for surveillance of the entire Nigerian EEZ so that – in conjunction with other assets and naval vessels – effective action can be taken.

With an overall investment of US\$195 million, the Deep Blue project is by far the largest project of this kind across the region. It should be noted that it is not a primarily counter-piracy project as it is rather aimed at curbing all types of illicit activities in Nigeria's maritime domain. Some of the investment costs have already been spent to buy assets such as fast intervention vessels and surveillance aircraft, a new control centre has also been inaugurated in 2019.

Recruitment and training of personnel for various specialised roles is another key aspect, somewhat complicated by the impact of the Covid-19 situation. It is therefore in doubt whether the entire Deep Blue project will be fully operational by late 2020 as planned or whether the schedule will be somewhat delayed. By and large, however, law enforcement capacities throughout Nigeria's EEZ – as well as response capacities in case of attacks against merchant ships – are likely to improve significantly in the coming years.

In the meantime, it is likely that security for vessels operating off Nigeria will remain privatised to a large degree. Under a Memorandum of Understanding with the Nigerian Navy, private companies are allowed to operate

*Countries neighbouring Nigeria have been affected by attacks since late 2019, leading to upgraded security measures around ports and anchorages.*

security escort vessels which are partly manned by naval personnel during tasks. Traditionally, these security vessels have been used to provide security around offshore facilities. In recent years, however, more and more security vessels have been tasked to escort merchant ships during voyages to and from Nigerian ports and terminals.

Many tankers – as well as other vessel types – are now under the protection of escort vessels, yet naval personnel are not allowed to operate beyond Nigeria's EEZ. Criminal networks in the Niger Delta have always been adaptable and responded flexibly to security countermeasures. Since late 2019, attacks therefore seem to have shifted and merchant ships have become more vulnerable outside of Nigeria's EEZ.

*Benin now allows the use of privately contracted armed security personnel at the Cotonou anchorage.*

This has prompted neighbouring countries to also step up security measures. The frequency of naval patrols around anchorages off ports like Lomé, Cotonou or Douala has been increased. At the time of writing, military personnel can now be provided as armed guards free of charge to all vessels anchoring off Douala. In Lomé, the Togolese military is also able to provide naval personnel as armed guards to merchant vessels at the anchorage. Details can generally be arranged through local agents who should be aware of the relevant procedures and regulations.

In Benin, a new policy – announced in July – even allows vessels calling at Cotonou to arrive at the anchorage with privately contracted armed security personnel. All ships without armed guards are instead protected by a military detachment while they remain at the anchorage. The port authority has issued a circular which includes further information regarding procedures and fees.<sup>2</sup> No other country in the region currently allows merchant ships to enter territorial waters with privately contracted armed security personnel onboard.

### *Links between piracy and other illicit activities*

The protection of vessels at sea is more complicated. Countries around the Gulf of Guinea do not have enough patrol boats to maintain a presence at sea at all times, especially outside of the immediate vicinity of naval bases. The current trend of attacks against vessels at significant distances offshore has therefore increased the concerns of many operators and seafarers.

However, it is very likely that some incidents that are reported as 'piracy' have close links to other types of illicit maritime activities. Individual cases therefore have to be carefully analysed to provide a realistic threat assessment. Some kidnappings of crew members that have been

*Navies and other maritime security agencies are often hampered by a lack of financial and human resources.*

<sup>2</sup> Note Circulaire No. 1713, issued on 29 July 2020, available in French on the Port of Cotonou's website ([www.portcotonou.com](http://www.portcotonou.com)).

reported in recent months, for example, were likely caused by disputes between criminal groups rather than motivated by ransom payments. It should be noted that this is extremely rare in attacks of vessels involved in international trade.

Overall, the extent of illicit activities in the maritime environment across the region has been underlined by detentions of small product tankers, fishing trawlers and other vessels in Nigeria as well as other countries in recent months. All of these vessels were suspected of involvement in illicit maritime activities, ranging from smuggling of fuel and other products to illegal fishing or unlicensed transshipments of catch at sea.

Links between different maritime security issues – including many that are not directly relevant for tanker operators – highlight the need to address these challenges on a broad scale, not merely limited to piracy. Sustainable solutions involving regional countries are otherwise impossible to implement.



## Recommendations

All types of tanker vessels may be targeted by Niger Delta-based attackers trying to kidnap crew members for the purpose of collecting ransoms. Even LNG tankers in ballast have come under attack off Nigeria in recent years, underlining the significant threat level that tanker operators in general have to mitigate.

First and foremost, the implementation of measures contained in the 'BMP West Africa' guidance decreases the chance that attackers are able to board any type of vessel at sea. Regular security drills should also be carried out to familiarize all crew members with relevant procedures. Additional measures, e.g. the use of dedicated escort vessels for transits to and from Nigerian ports and terminals, may be considered, based on a thorough risk assessment that includes the current threat level, the vulnerability of a particular vessel and the potential consequences of a successful attack.



Finally, companies should also evaluate and adjust their contingency plans, instructions for masters and emergency guidelines to reduce the overall risk to crews, ships and cargoes as much as possible. Despite ongoing efforts across the region that were outlined above, the situation remains volatile and should be constantly monitored.