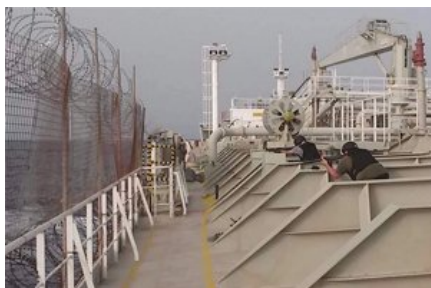




Gulf of Guinea's pervasive piracy eclipses progress elsewhere

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BY SAM BOJARSKI



Courtesy Thanos Gournelos

A security team conducts an anti-piracy drill on a ship in the Indian Ocean. The use of razor wire is a common vessel hardening procedure and is recommended by a coalition of international shipping groups to deter piracy.

In 2018, the International Maritime Bureau (IMB) recorded 201 incidents of maritime piracy and armed robbery, according to its annual report published in January. All six hijackings, 13 of 18 incidents of ships being fired upon, and 130 of 141 hostage situations occurred in the Gulf of Guinea.

The total number of incidents increased by about 12 percent from 2017, when attacks hit a 22-year low. Cyrus Mody, an assistant director with the IMB, mentioned multiple regions

where anti-piracy efforts have been successful, but he and other security experts expressed concern about the Gulf of Guinea, where piracy and armed robbery attacks have more than doubled year over year.

Jakob Larsen, head of maritime security at the Baltic and International Maritime Council (BIMCO), said his organization's members have considered reducing their activities in the area.

"Shipowners fear for the security and safety of their seafarers, and the seafarers themselves are of course also concerned," Larsen said.

But Mody said seafarers in the Gulf of Guinea are generally following security protocols that mirror Best Management Practices Version 5 (BMP5), drafted by international shipping groups for reducing piracy off the coast of Somalia.

BIMCO has called on the United States, China and European nations to increase their naval presence and patrol international waters in the gulf region, with the help of local law enforcement.

An international naval presence has helped reduce Somali piracy, according to Mody. But in that area, "ships (are) transiting through an ocean region, whereas in the Gulf of Guinea and West Africa, ships are actually coming into an area of risk, and that is a big difference," he said.

Orlando Wilson, a consultant at Risks Inc., a Florida-based company that provides security training, said that using international navies would help to a degree. But he

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said many attacks in the Gulf of Guinea occur within territorial waters, where regional states have greater responsibility.

Corruption and lack of oversight have decreased the ability of these states to combat piracy, according to Wilson.

“You might have the boats there, but so what? The people that should be using them, the people that should be operating them are not trained, they’re not interested and they don’t even bother turning up for work,” Wilson said. Armed groups with deep political connections have become more present in the region, he added.

Mody also noted that for 2018, fewer incidents went unreported in the Gulf of Guinea, with the number now less than half of all encounters. “For a couple of years, we were seeing that number to be in the 60-percent-plus (range),” he said.

Despite the pervasive piracy in the Gulf of Guinea, Mody said there has been progress in two other key regions. The Indonesian Marine Police, with support from the IMB, has deployed patrol boats in ports and anchorages known for armed robbery attacks. The effort has reduced incidents for three successive years, according to the IMB’s piracy report.

“We would directly attribute the reduction in the number of instances in the Southeast Asian region to the initiative by the Indonesian Marine Police,” Mody said.

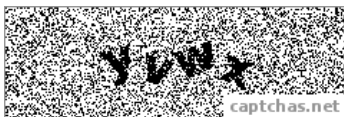
Off the coast of Somalia, a combination of international naval assets, armed security on vessels and following BMP5 protocols has effectively deterred piracy, he said. The IMB attributed just two attempted attacks to Somali pirates last year, down from nine actual and attempted attacks in 2017.

“If you look at Southeast Asia, there’s been a decline there. East Africa, there has definitely been an overall decline over the years. The reason we’ve seen this spike (in piracy worldwide) is only because of the number of instances which were reported to us from the Gulf of Guinea region,” Mody said.

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