

The Gulf of Guinea: The New Danger Zone

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Within a decade, the Gulf of Guinea has become one of the most dangerous maritime areas in the world. Maritime insecurity is a major regional problem that is compromising the development of this strategic economic area and threatening maritime trade in the short term and the stability of coastal states in the long term. Initially taken by surprise, the region's governments are now aware of the problem and the UN is organising a summit meeting on the issue. In order to avoid violent transnational crime destabilising the maritime economy and coastal states, as it has done on the East African coast, these states must fill the security vacuum in their territorial waters and provide a collective response to this danger. Gulf of Guinea countries must press for dynamic cooperation between the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), take the initiative in promoting security and adopt a new approach based on improving not only security but also economic governance.

The recent discovery of offshore hydrocarbon deposits has increased the geostrategic importance of the Gulf of Guinea. After long neglecting their maritime zones, Gulf of Guinea states are now aware of their weakness. On the international front, renewed Western interest in the region is accompanied by similar interest from emerging nations. In this context, the rise in maritime crime has increased collective concern in a region where, for decades, the problems of sovereignty and territorial control have only been posed on dry land.

The Niger delta region in Nigeria was the initial epicentre of maritime crime. For decades, oil production has paradoxically created poverty. As social tensions and environmental pollution increased, oil income has, in large part, only benefited central government, oil companies and local elites. Those excluded from the system turned to violent opposition. Forced to bypass the state to gain access to even a fraction of this wealth, they have organised illegal activities, including siphoning off crude oil, clandestine refining and illegal trade in fuel. The constant increase in the value of the industry has allowed these activities to prosper and economic crime to spread.

The weakness and general inadequacy of the maritime policies of Gulf of Guinea states and the lack of cooperation between them have allowed criminal networks to diversify their activities and gradually extend them away from the Nigerian coast and out on to the high seas. Crime does not affect only the oil industry; it has diversified to include piracy and increasingly audacious and well-planned sea-borne raids. Criminal groups have learned quickly and appeared along the coasts of Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, São Tomé and Príncipe, Benin and Togo, taking advantage of troubled socio-political situations.

Having recovered from the initial surprise, Gulf of Guinea states and Western countries are exploring how best to deal with the problem before it causes wider instability. States and regional organisations have launched specific operations and are formulating strategies to improve security.

Those states most affected aim to build navies and increase resources for coastal policing in the hope of deterring criminals.

At the regional level, within the framework of its peace and security policies, ECCAS has created a regional maritime security centre and organised joint training exercises. However, states do not find it straightforward to organise joint funding or coordinate their efforts. Maritime policies are embryonic and symbolic and states are unable to maintain a continuous presence at sea. In the case of ECOWAS, maritime cooperation is still in its infancy and is hampered by political tensions and distrust of neighbouring states toward Nigeria.

At the inter-regional level, cooperation between ECCAS and ECOWAS would allow regional patrols to exercise the right of pursuit beyond maritime borders. However, inter-regional discussions have only just begun and political tensions hamper efforts to promote practical cooperation. Meanwhile, Western powers (U.S., France, U.K.) and emerging nations (Brazil, China, India, South Africa) with economic interests in the region are providing financial support and security expertise to assist local initiatives.

The institutionalisation of regional cooperation and the increase in the number of international initiatives must not obscure the fact that rising crime in the Gulf of Guinea is mainly due to poor governance. Most states in the region have been unable to control economic activities in their maritime zones and in international waters and ensure the development of their coasts. This collective failure has created a major opportunity for criminal networks that feed on the needs and resentments of local communities. A range of urgent measures is needed to reverse this trend: reforms to improve governance of the economy and security sector, comprehensive and effective maritime public policies and practical regional cooperation beyond declarations of intent. A long-term response is needed because, although piracy is a recent phenomenon in the region, its root causes are much deeper.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To the Governments of the Gulf of Guinea States (Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Togo, Benin, Nigeria, Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, São Tomé and Príncipe, Gabon, Congo-Brazzaville, Democratic Republic of Congo and Angola):

1. Prioritise the fight against maritime crime by creating an inter-ministerial committee in each country to draw up a national maritime strategy to tackle the immediate threat and the root causes of the problem. These committees should include at least the ministers of social affairs, foreign affairs, defence, interior, transport, economy, labour, fishing and natural resources.

To combat the root causes of maritime crime

2. Combat crime in the hydrocarbons and shipping sectors by conducting research into the illegal trade in fuel in order to identify the companies involved in illegal activities.

3. Boost job creation along the coast, in particular by protecting artisanal fishing, stimulating the local fish processing industry, providing professional training for vulnerable sectors of the population (former combatants and unemployed youth) and reinvesting assets seized from fuel

smugglers in development projects.

4. Strengthen maritime law enforcement through professionalisation of naval forces, maritime law enforcement bodies and port authorities, which should increase their technological capacity and intelligence networks to monitor all activity in their exclusive economic zones.

To strengthen anti-piracy policies at sea and on land

5. Maintain navy patrols in mooring zones and territorial waters day and night and carry out regular surveillance flights.

6. Work closely with the UN's International Maritime Organisation (IMO) and shipping industry to draw up best management practices advising ship owners, captains and crews on anti-piracy measures.

7. Set up a national inter-agency anti-piracy task force to investigate, arrest and prosecute pirate gangs on land and at sea.

8. Accede to all necessary international legal instruments including the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and the 2005 Protocol to the Convention for the Suppression of Unlawful Acts against the Safety of Maritime Navigation, integrate these conventions into national law and train personnel responsible for implementing them, especially in the judicial system.

To strengthen cooperation

9. Sign bilateral agreements at the presidential level between direct neighbours to facilitate extraditions and enable close cooperation between navies, maritime administration agencies and police forces in counter-piracy work.

10. Organise in the near future joint surveillance operations in especially dangerous zones:

a) Nigeria, Benin and Togo should agree to expand the joint Operation Prosperity to include Togo's territorial waters;

b) Nigeria and Cameroon should conduct joint patrols on their maritime borders.

11. Participate fully in efforts by ECCAS and ECOWAS to draw up a regional maritime security strategy and share resources.

12. Strengthen inter-regional cooperation by:

a) organising a Gulf of Guinea summit at which heads of state should sign the Memorandum of Understanding between ECCAS and ECOWAS on Maritime Security in the Central and Western Maritime Region and the Multilateral Agreement on Cooperation to Suppress Illicit Maritime Activities in West and Central Africa; and

b) making the Maritime Trade Information Sharing Centre (MTISC) to be set up in Ghana an information collection and dissemination tool for the Gulf of Guinea and transforming the regional training service for maritime security planned by ECCAS into a training centre for the whole

region.

To International Partners:

13. Coordinate international support through a multinational maritime affairs committee for each country and ensure that foreign interventions are aligned with national strategies.

14. Assist national maritime affairs committees in designing comprehensive maritime policies that address the immediate threat and root causes of maritime crime; and support coastal states in their efforts to create jobs.

15. Impress upon Gulf of Guinea states the need to treat piracy as a transnational organised crime that demands a coordinated response including naval operations, investigative police work and prosecution of suspects; and design programmes to strengthen the capacities of all maritime law enforcement agencies.

To the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and Interpol:

16. Advise and assist with tracking financial flows to Gulf of Guinea states as part of investigations into pirate organisations and the smuggling of hydrocarbons.

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