UK P&I CLUB

L P Bulletin

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Bulletin 763 - 05/11 - Piracy: A Change of Tactics - West Africa

Members should be made aware of a worrying change in motives and tactics adopted by Pirates off the West African coast.

Previously attacks off the West Africa coast could be separated into two main areas;

1. Petty theft of crew personal effects and ships stores in and around port areas
2. Hijacking / Pirating of vessels for political means.

However it seems the commercial opportunities of piracy have manifest themselves a little deeper in the West African pirates who are now turning to wholesale theft of oil cargoes from tankers.

Also worrying is the increased range of activity of these pirates. Where, as expressed above the pirates have restricted themselves to port areas or to the politically significant Bonny river and Niger Delta regions they are now travelling further afield and into foreign territories to capture vessels. It is believed the culprits are Nigerian and as vessels have moved away from the 'piracy danger area' of offshore Lagos to carry out ship to ship transfer operations the pirates seemed to have emigrated along the coast to neighbouring Benin and the shores of Cotonou.

The Pirates destroy all communications equipment and then transfer or attempt to transfer cargo to their own small tanker. These operations take up to four days with the crew held hostage and threatened with violence if they do not cooperate.

This migration may well have been part due to the efforts of the Nigerian authorities who seem to be undertaking a crack down on piracy activity in their own waters. The Nigerian Navy reportedly captured some alleged pirates who were identified by the crew of two attacked vessels in mid January 2011. Articles appearing in the Nigerian press point towards government authorities mounting anti piracy patrols and becoming more pro-active against pirate attacks. However their resources remain limited.

Reproduced below are recent examples of where pirates have taken over tanker vessels and forced the crew at gunpoint to conduct ship to ship transfer of their cargoes to awaiting pirate tank barges;

QUOTE

Incident 1 - offshore Cotonou 21.11.10

Precautions were apparently taken by the crew members to limit the access of the pirates into the accommodations/cabins; Doors were blocked by iron pipes and wood designed for such purposes. The pirates were armed with AK 47 rifles and pump action guns. They were wearing old T-shirts and old shoes. Some of them were barefooted. The pirates reportedly appeared nervous, hysterical and some of them were probably high on drugs. They were also armed with burglary tools, such as steel pipes with flattened ends. One crew member was shot in the area of the abdominal cavity, he was moved ashore to Lagos when the pirates left and received necessary emergency medical treatment.

Incident 2 - offshore Cotonou 15.02.2011.

On boarding the subject tanker, the pirates destroyed some communication equipment on the bridge. All the cabins were ransacked by the pirates. Apart from cash, wristwatches and rings/chains, the personal effects of the crewmembers were stolen, including underpants and towels. The sum of USD 79,183 for CTM and personal cash of about USD 200 were stolen by the pirates from the supercargo.

The crewmembers were held in the crew mess room for 4 days. Only the chief officer was allowed on deck (at the threat of being killed if he made a wrong move) to guide / help the pirates with discharge operation. While the chief engineer and either the 3rd engineer or the electrician, were allowed into the engine room under armed guard to assist the pirates.

Incident 3 - offshore Cotonou 14.04.11

At about 14.39 LT, while in position Lat: 05.16,87` N & Long: 002.52,22 E, approximately 70 miles south of the Benin coast. The vessel came under attack and was seized by pirates offshore Cotonou. About 10 pirates boarded the ship with the intent of stealing cargo. They wrecked all communications equipment on boarding.

UNQUOTE

Although the increase in vigilance of the Nigerian authorities and their continued action against pirate activity is most welcome it is understood that the Nigerian Navy's resources are limited both in number and scope. All vessels, especially tankers, should take the upmost vigilance when operating off the coast of West Africa. It should also be noted that the Beninese authorities lack such resources available to the Nigerian Navy and that appeals for assistance whilst under attack in Beninese waters are likely to go unanswered.

The Club would wish to emphasise that piracy is not restricted to the Indian Ocean and is in fact a global issue. Vigilance against piracy should be practiced in all areas where piracy activity is suspected.

Source of Information:

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