

Piracy: West Africa running riot.

Seafarers manning the numerous offshore support vessels in the Niger Delta have long been soft targets for the numerous maritime criminals -many claiming to be militants - operating in that area and its surrounds. After kidnap, the seafarers are held in camps ashore suffering many privations while their captors negotiate a ransom payment (details of which are seldom made public) with their employers who are, in most cases, an international consortium. As might be expected, the support vessels are manned by Nigerian crew members and Officers from Asia or Europe and it is invariably the Officers who are held hostage.

In most cases the criminals tend to operate off their own foreshore and their illicit gains are, to a degree, used to bolster the economy of their own communities so local support is readily forthcoming.

In a recent case the owners of the Malaysian flag support vessel "Armada Tuah 101" reportedly paid a ransom approaching one million USD (although this figure has been denied) for the release of six Officers and it is estimated that in the immediate area the kidnapping "industry" involving seafarers and shoreside oil workers earns some five million USD monthly. Despite severe local laws - including the death penalty - it is believed that certain individuals (politicians and members of the security forces) enjoy a degree of immunity from prosecution.

Most worryingly, there are clear signs that the criminals are now able to operate much further offshore than hitherto and the UK registered "Esther C." -steaming some 95 miles off the coastline - probably felt she had little to fear until she was attacked and three Officers - a Romanian and two Russians - taken hostage. Almost certainly this operation necessitated the use of a "mother ship" and it is suspected that a Liberian flag support vessel hijacked earlier that day was used to mount the second attack. It is also thought that the attackers had gained some previous knowledge of the track and movements of the "Esther C" and this is being investigated.

Until recently, the hijacking of tankers has been the major threat to those trading in Nigerian waters but increased naval activity in the area has, to a degree, curtailed this lucrative activity but there are many who fear that this will result in an increase in hijacking for ransom.

Undoubtedly, maritime trade is more at risk today than at any time since WW2 and in many of the world's oceans there are areas where merchant ships are being denied their right to "proceed on the seas upon their lawful occasions". Huge tracts of the Indian Ocean, Gulf of Aden, Malacca Straits, Gulf of Guinea and the Singapore Straits are now regarded as high-risk areas and the seafarers manning the ships transiting them are at risk of kidnap - or worse.

Who remembers the global outcry when, some 28 years ago, the Italian flag passenger vessel "Achille Lauro" - on passage from Alexandria to Port Said -was hijacked by four members of the Palestine Liberation Front and instructed to proceed to a Syrian port pending the release of 50 Palestinians in an Israeli prison? Eventually, after murdering an American Jewish passenger (in his wheelchair) and throwing his body overboard the hijackers agreed to abandon the ship in exchange for safe conduct. The US Navy forced their aircraft to land at a NATO base in Sicily and the men were arrested. The event enjoyed radio and television coverage throughout several days and every newspaper reported every development in great detail.

Today, seafarers are being murdered and incarcerated on almost a weekly basis yet those who depend upon them for the maintenance of their supply chain of food and other necessities (and luxuries) appear to be utterly disinterested. Today we hear much about our "global economy" but if this is to be maintained then all participating States must recognise their obligation to suppress piracy in accordance with the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea.

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Since Captain Kelso's report there has been a worrying escalation of piracy in the Gulf of Guinea with two sizeable German box-boats attacked and hostages taken, 4 from the Hansa Marburg on 23rd April and 5 from the City of Xiamen on 25th April. It is reported that the latter was attacked by 14 pirates in two speedboats. They gained access to the citadel and took the senior officers: the Captain, Chief Officer, Chief, 2nd and 3rd Engineers. These hostages are reported to have been released in early May.

A 19 metre, 22 knot, bullet-proof 'security' passenger launch, the UTAI 8, with 3 crew, disappeared on the morning of 25th April and is thought to be being used by the pirates as a mother-ship. It is speculated that the pirates have some military experience and are not only heavily armed but have the use of hydraulic cutting equipment to breach the citadels.



Esther C



Hansa Marburg



City of Xiamen