



RiskIntelligence



Security Considerations for Tanker Operators in the Gulf of Guinea

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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 almost 100 maritime security incidents across the region in 2019 to date, around one third of those involved tanker vessels of all types. Two attacks in December 2019 against a VLCC and a product tanker at great distance from the shore have highlighted the problem once again. The perpetrators escaped with 19 and 20 hostages respectively, underlining the significant threat level for tanker operations in the Gulf of Guinea.

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 are affected. Whilst naval forces in Nigeria – and other countries in the region – are being enhanced, kidnap-for-ransom attacks are very 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 measures contained in the "Guidelines for Owners, Operators and Masters for protection against piracy and armed robbery in the Gulf of Guinea region", read in conjunction with the Global Counter-Piracy Guidance for Companies, Masters and Seafarers (GCPG), decreases the chance that attackers are able to board a vessel at sea. 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 adjust contingency plans, instructions for masters

General background

The security situation in the Gulf of Guinea, the waters off countries between Côte d'Ivoire and Gabon, has long been a cause of concern for the shipping industry in general and tanker operators in particular. It is unlikely to improve significantly in the next 12 to 24 months.

In November 2019, crew members from three different ships were kidnapped. Two other attacks targeted a VLCC south of the terminals at Bonny in the Niger Delta and a product tanker around 120 nm south of Cotonou in December 2019. The perpetrators kidnapped 19 and 20 seafarers respectively and took them to holding camps in the Niger Delta for the duration of ransom negotiations.

Despite these high-profile incidents, which have generated a lot of media headlines in recent weeks, the overall security situation throughout the Gulf of Guinea has changed little in the long-term view. Different types of criminal activities at sea – including, but not limited to piracy – have been a constant feature in the Gulf of Guinea. Differences in the reported number of maritime security incidents involving merchant vessels are highlighted in Figure 1.

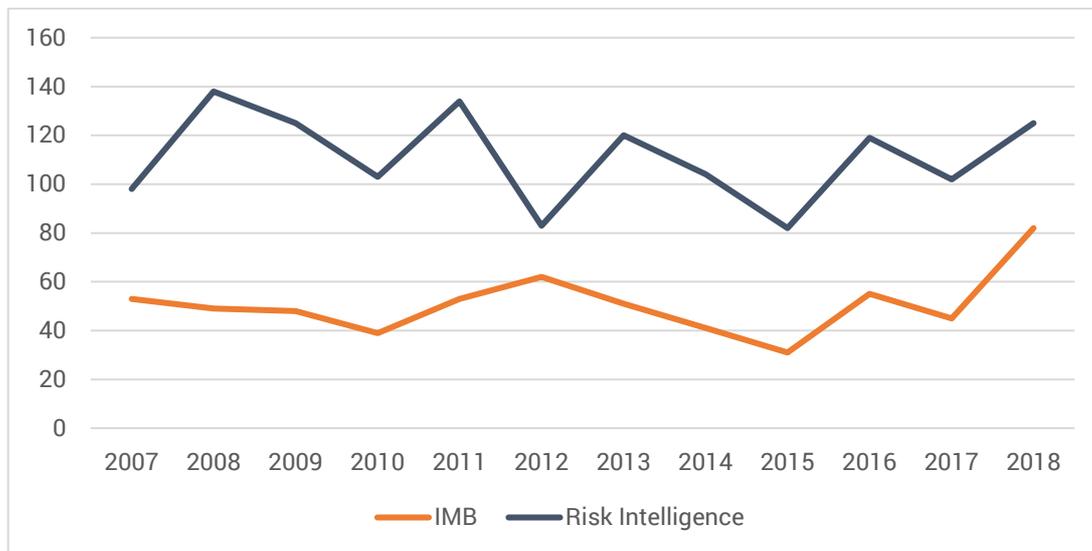


Figure 1: Annual number of security incidents in West Africa (Senegal to Angola) as recorded by Risk Intelligence and the International Maritime Bureau (IMB).

According to the IMB's annual reports, there have never been more attacks reported across West Africa than in 2018. These figures, however, only include attacks that are officially reported to the IMB, based on a very limited number of potential sources. While that allows for a comparison over many years, under-reporting has often been identified as an issue.

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. These figures show that the number of security incidents in 2018 was within the long-term average. For 2019, the overall number of incidents is very likely to be slightly lower than for the previous year. It should be noted that these numbers include all types of incidents, yet the number of high-profile kidnap-for-ransom attacks in 2018 or 2019 was also close to the annual average over the past ten years.

Looking at different types of attacks that are included in these figures is also important. In many countries around the Gulf of Guinea, tanker operators mainly face petty thefts from ships at berth or at anchor. Violence against crew members is very unlikely during these petty theft attacks, perpetrators generally try to escape when they are detected.

Violent attacks, particularly those aimed at kidnapping crew members, are concentrated on the region around the Niger Delta. In this part of Nigeria, kidnappings on land have been a problem for many years. Taking hostages and collecting ransoms has evolved into a lucrative business model, requiring holding camps in isolated locations, foot soldiers who carry out attacks and act as guards as well as negotiators with the necessary skills. All these can be found in the Niger Delta; maritime kidnappings are therefore an extension of a land-based security threat.

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

In short, this has two important implications for tanker operators:

- In the next 12 to 24 months, the current situation is unlikely to change significantly; 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 should be supplemented to comprehensive threat and/or risk assessments for specific vessels and voyages. Contingency plans – both on the vessel and the company level – should be assessed and updated regularly.

Shipping companies can mitigate the risk of trading in the Gulf of Guinea significantly, yet they are not able to influence the overall threat of attacks against their vessels. Awareness about ongoing developments and a combination of mitigation measures are therefore extremely important.

Evolving threat

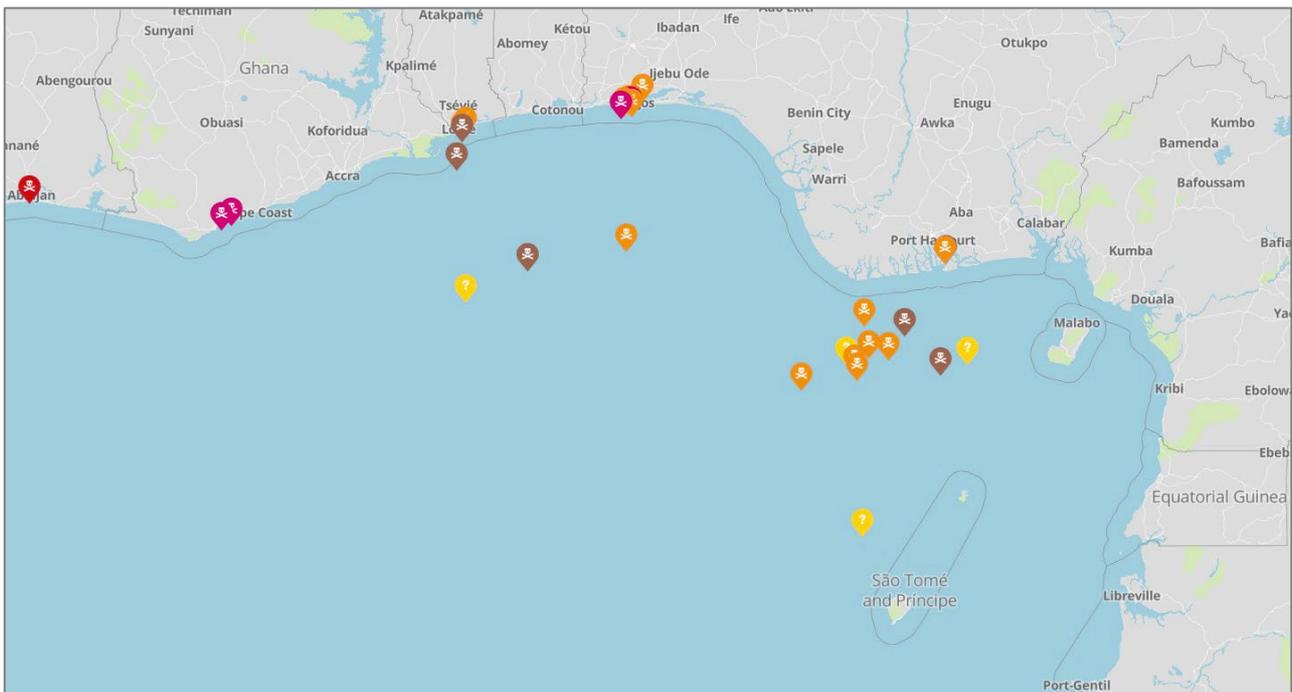
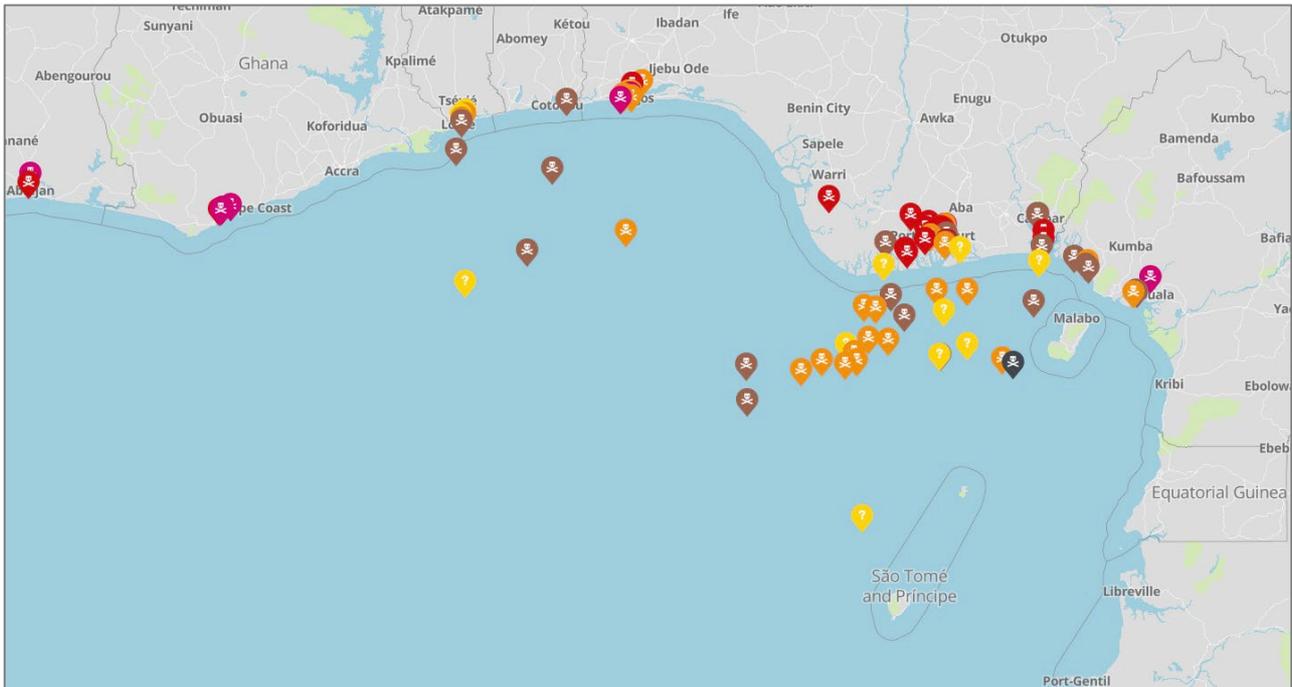
As mentioned above, threat and risk assessments are extremely important to identify relevant mitigation measures and to reduce the risks for crews, cargoes and ships. At the same time, such assessments are complicated by a constantly evolving threat situation in the Gulf of Guinea which can change significantly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

The distribution of attacks in 2019 to date against merchant ships in general and tanker vessels in particular is shown in Figures 3 and 4. The overall evolution of the threat between October 2016 and September 2019 – with a specific look at incidents involving tankers of all types – is illustrated by Figures 5 to 10. Incident icons are explained in Figure 2.

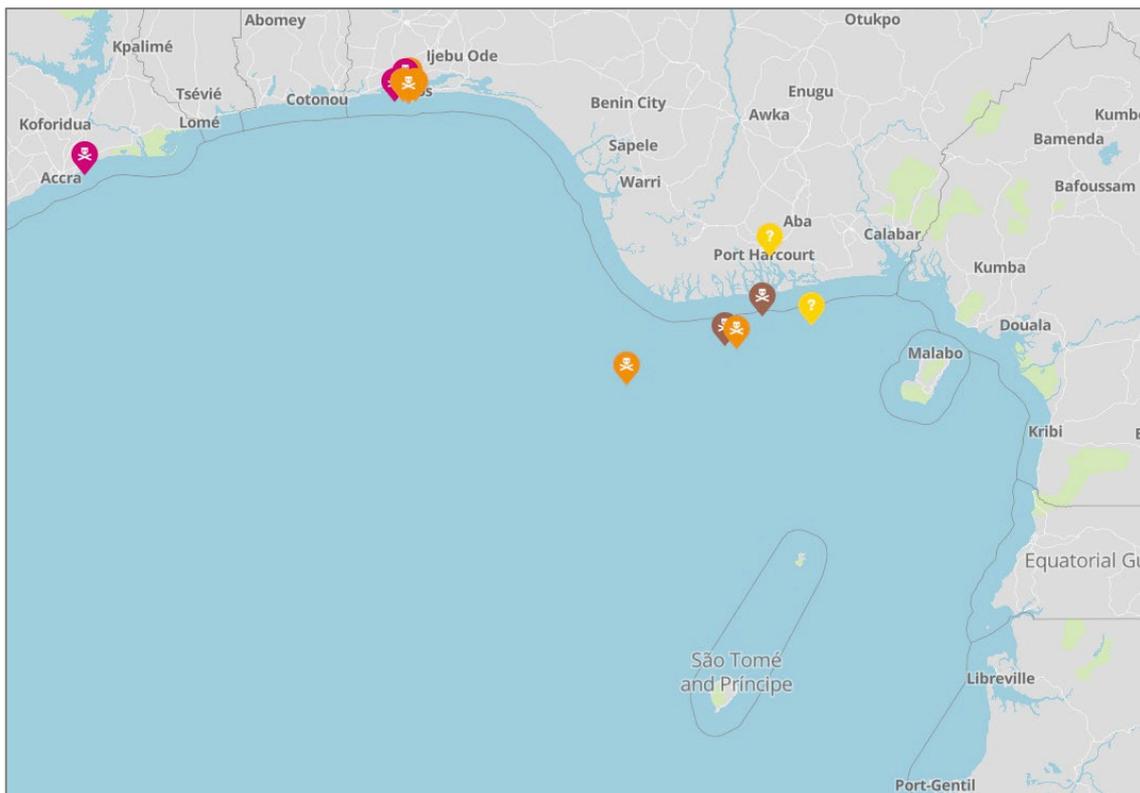
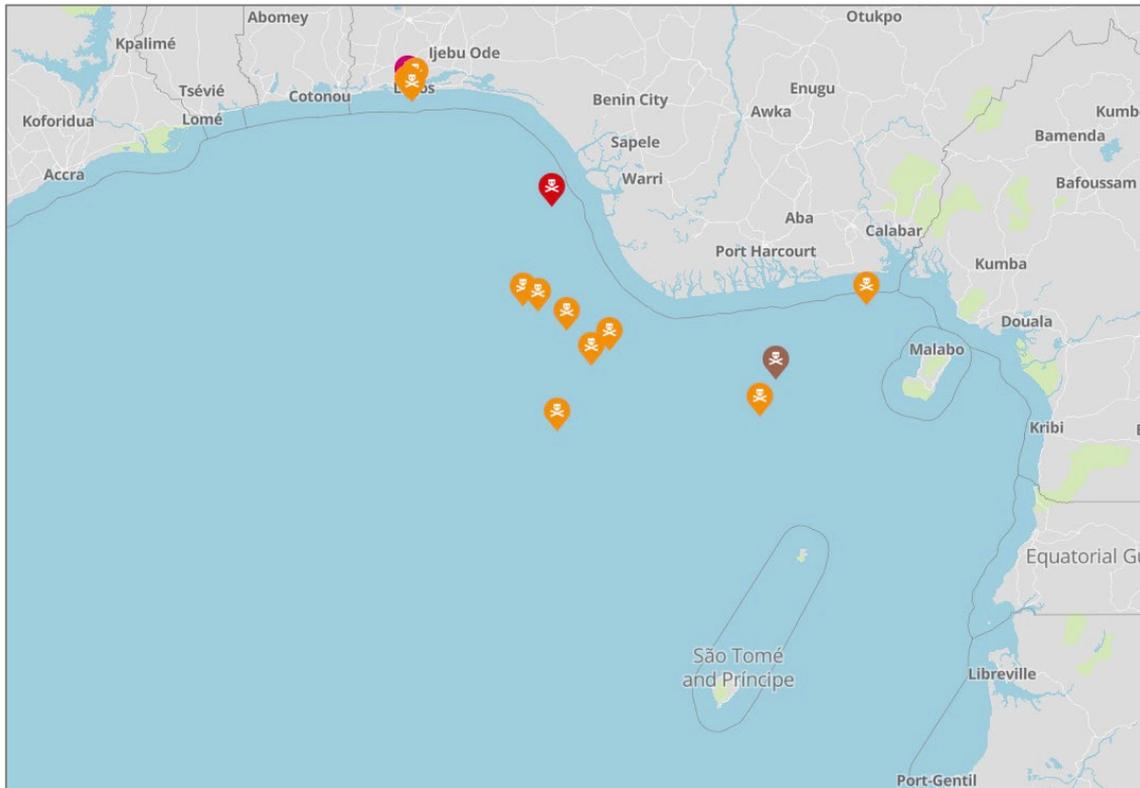
Figures 5 to 10 alternate between the dry season – roughly from October to March – and the rainy season – roughly from April to September – in the Niger Delta. By and large, weather conditions during the rainy season rarely allow for operations of small boats at significant distances offshore. While spells of good weather are possible, the general pattern of few offshore attacks during the rainy season and an intensifying threat during the dry season has been constant in recent years.



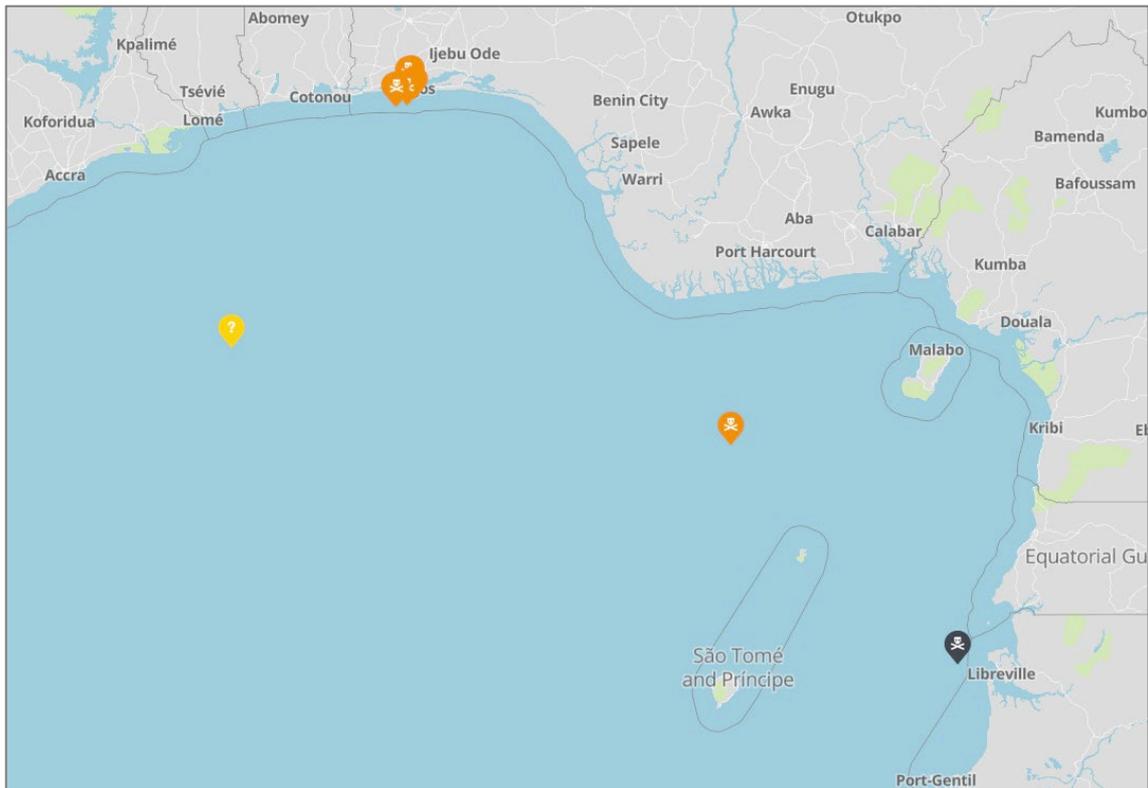
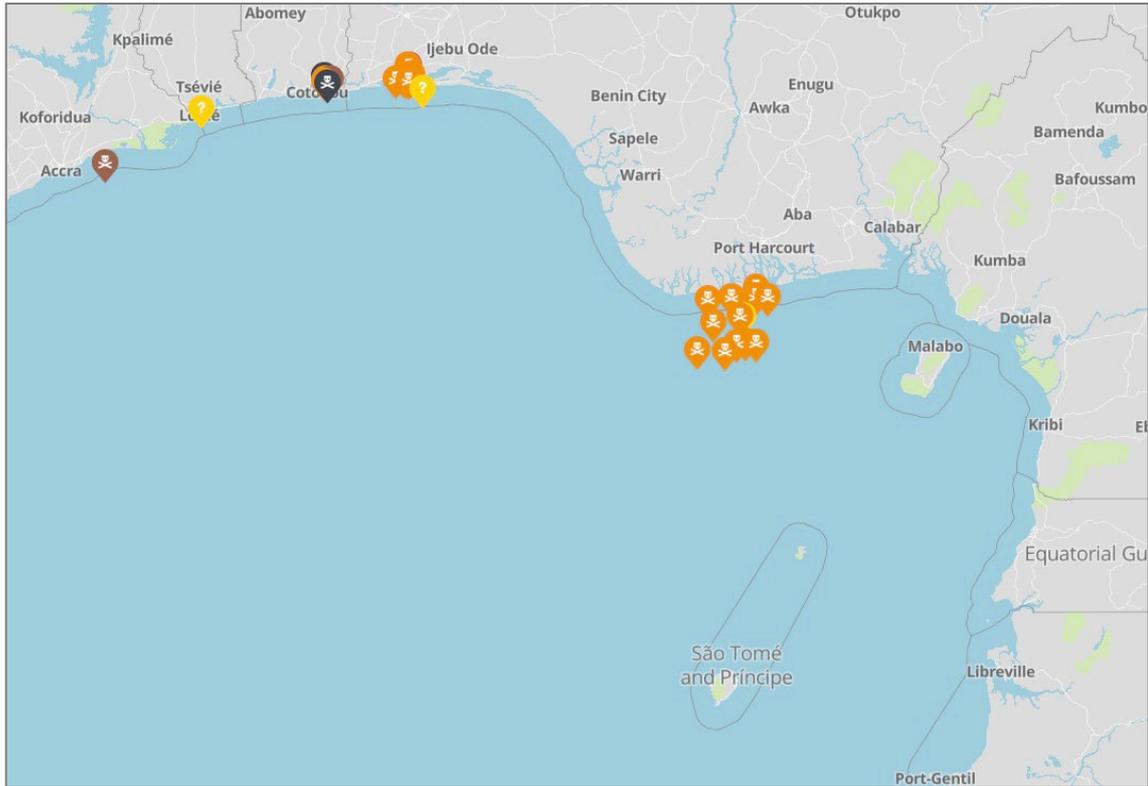
Figure 2: Explanation for icons shown in Figures 3 to 10 below.



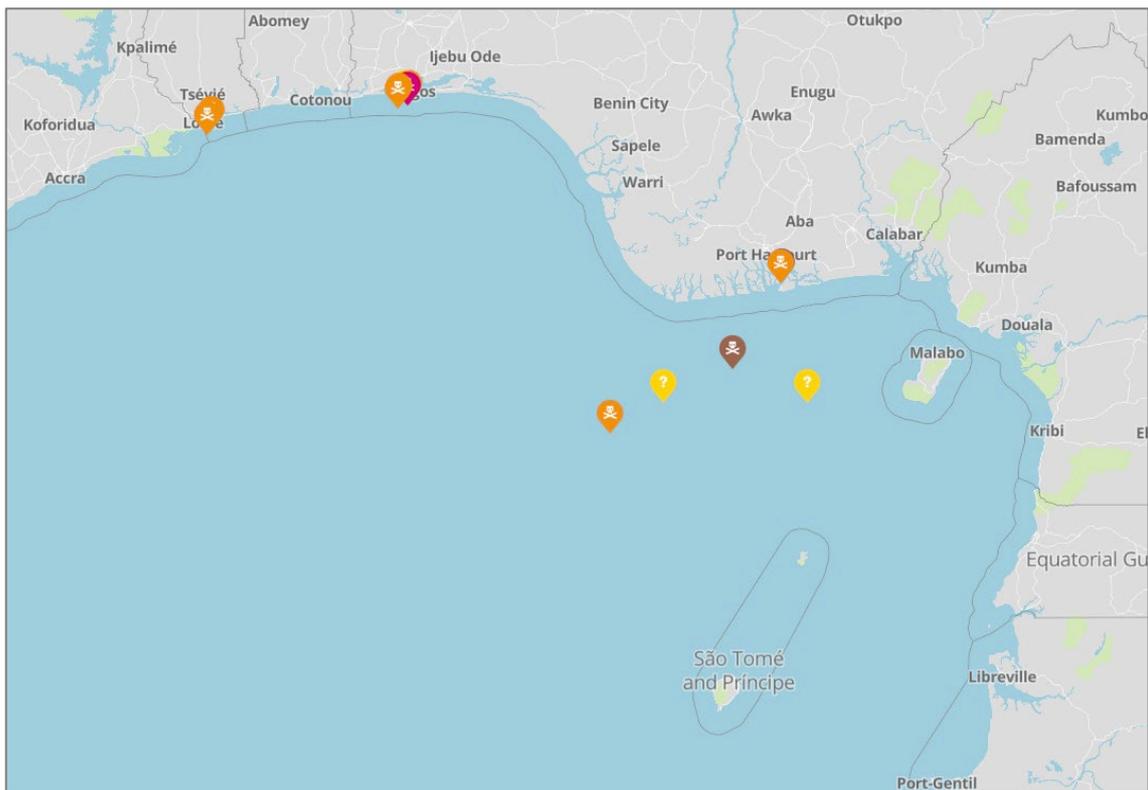
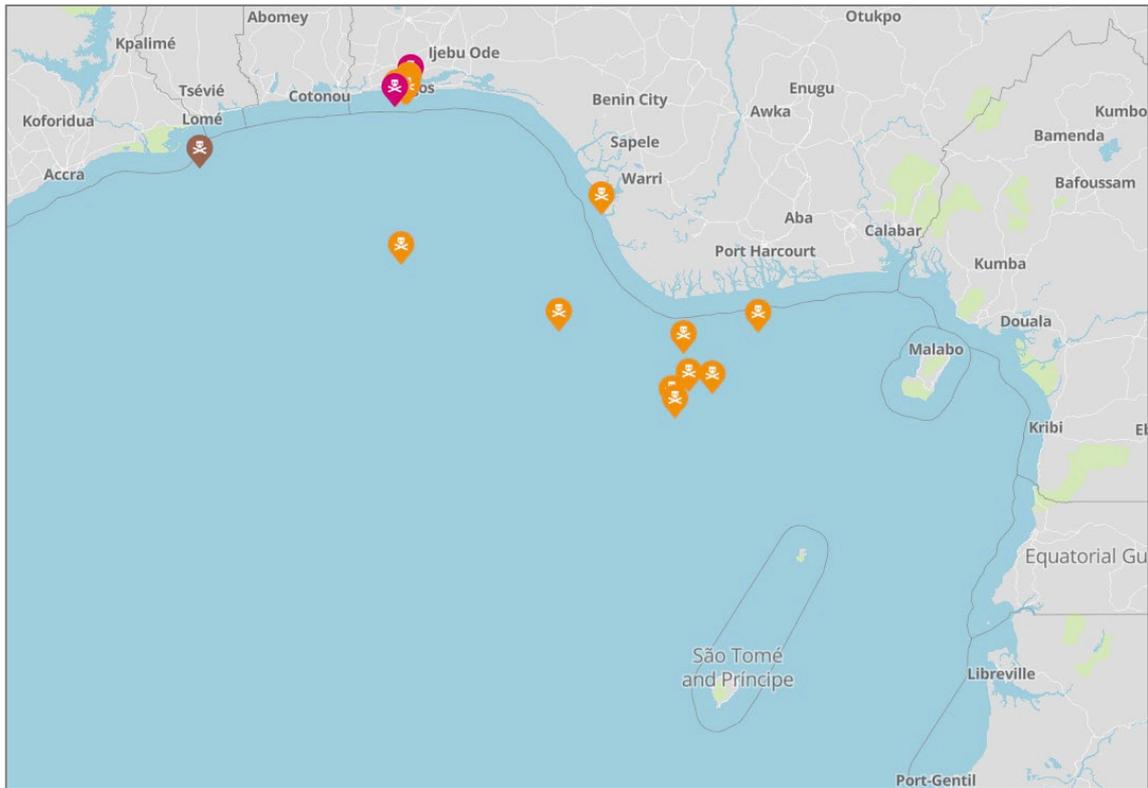
Figures 3 and 4: Maritime security incidents in the Gulf of Guinea, involving all types of vessels (above) and only tankers (below) between 1 January and 18 December 2019 (Source: Risk Intelligence System).



Figures 5 and 6: Maritime security incidents involving tanker vessels between 1 October 2016 and 31 March 2017 (above) and between 1 April and 30 September 2017 (below) (Source: Risk Intelligence System).



Figures 7 and 8: Maritime security incidents involving tanker vessels between 1 October 2017 and 31 March 2018 (above) and between 1 April and 30 September 2018 (below) (Source: Risk Intelligence System).



Figures 9 and 10: Maritime security incidents involving tanker vessels between 1 October 2018 and 31 March 2019 (above) and between 1 April and 30 September 2019 (below) (Source: Risk Intelligence System).

Aside from seasonal variations, the maps highlight changing 'hotspots' for attacks against tankers off the Nigerian coastline. These changes are linked to factors like weather conditions, changes in patterns of maritime traffic or law enforcement operations at sea, but also to the overall security situation on land across the Niger Delta.

- Small-scale attacks against ships at berth in and at anchor off Lagos are frequent, yet these rarely involve violence against crew members. 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 with crude methods for sale on local markets. They are likely to escape upon discovery by the crew.
- Violent attacks, generally with the aim to kidnap crew members, are centred off the Niger Delta. Main areas of concern continuously shift, highlighted by a cluster of attacks off Bayelsa state in early 2017 (Figure 3), followed by attacks concentrated on the approach to Bonny in 2018 (Figure 5). In early 2019, kidnap-for-ransom attacks were again concentrated off Bayelsa state (Figure 7), but also reported in neighbouring countries. This trend has intensified since early November, explained in detail below.

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 represent a large percentage of maritime traffic off the Niger Delta, meaning that they suffer from a high number of attacks. Due to low freeboard and limited speed, product tankers are particularly easy to board, but other types – including LNG tankers in ballast – have also been attacked.

Overall, 60 successful or failed kidnap-for-ransom attacks against tanker vessels in the Gulf of Guinea were recorded by Risk Intelligence since January 2016. Figure 11 shows the distribution of attacks by month.

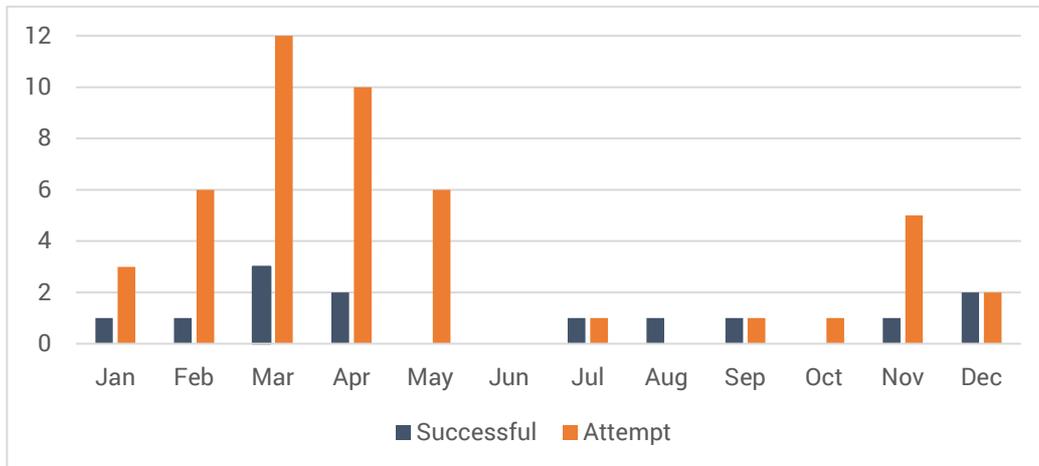


Figure 11: Successful and attempted kidnap-for-ransom attacks against tanker vessels between 1 January 2016 and 18 December 2019 (Source: Risk Intelligence System).

Once again, Figure 11 highlights that offshore attacks are significantly more likely during the dry season in the Niger Delta, i.e. between October and March. Almost all incidents recorded during April and May took place during spells of good weather in 2016, allowing attackers to use speedboats at considerable distances from the coastline.

Regarding the time of day, perpetrators do not have a preference for attacks during the day or at night. However, attacks at night are significantly more likely to result in the kidnapping of crew members, shown in Figure 12.

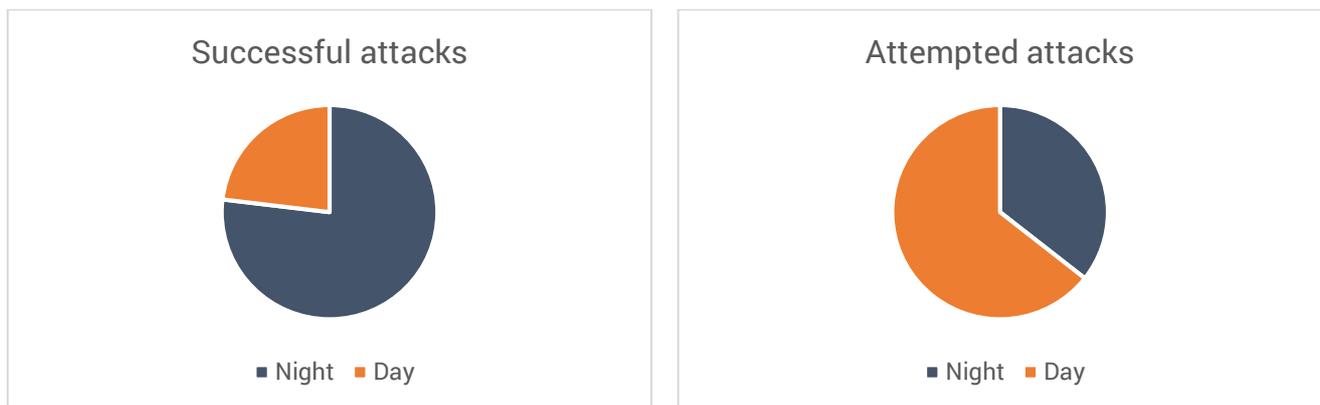


Figure 12: Successful and attempted kidnap-for-ransom attacks against tanker vessels between 1 January 2016 and 18 December 2019 (Source: Risk Intelligence System).

The overall number of attacks during the day and at night has been almost the same since 2016 yet Figure 12 shows that the percentage of successful attacks at night is significantly

higher. This 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.

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, 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 even when other mitigation measures have been put in place.

Current trends

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 has started to address pirate attacks throughout Nigeria's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). At the same time, the navy continues to face severe resource constraints, and the Nigerian military overall is tasked with countering several security challenges across the country. In addition to the Nigerian Navy, the civilian authorities led by NIMASA are stepping up their anti-piracy resources and they believe that these will become more effective in 2020.

Security for vessels operating off Nigeria has therefore been privatised to a large degree.

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

Under a Memorandum of Understanding with the Nigerian Navy, private companies are allowed to operate 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. In 2019, attacks therefore seem to have shifted to areas where escort vessels manned by Nigerian Navy personnel cannot operate, meaning that merchant ships are more vulnerable outside of Nigeria's EEZ.

This has affected several neighbouring countries. Nine crew members were kidnapped from an anchored ship off Cotonou and four seafarers were taken from another vessel at anchor off Lomé in November. Successful attacks were also recorded in

Countries neighbouring Nigeria have been affected by attacks in 2019, leading to upgraded security measures in the vicinity of several ports and anchorages

March and August at the Douala anchorage in Cameroon. Local authorities have upgraded security measures since. For example, military personnel can now be provided as armed guards free of charge to all vessels anchoring off Cotonou and Douala. Patrols around the respective anchorages have also been increased, yet navies in Benin and Cameroon – as well as in other countries around the Gulf of Guinea – do not have enough patrol boats to maintain a presence at sea at all times.

The protection of vessels at sea is more complicated. During another incident that was recorded in November, seven crew members were kidnapped from an AHTS vessel in Equatorial Guinea's EEZ, close to the maritime border with Nigeria. In December, the attack against a VLCC south of Bonny made headlines as 19 crew members were taken as hostages. Finally, the attack against a product tanker around 120 nm south of Cotonou led to the kidnapping of 20 seafarers.

These two most recent incidents also underline another trend that has been observed since 2016. On average, more crew members are kidnapped per incident than before, shown in Figure 13.

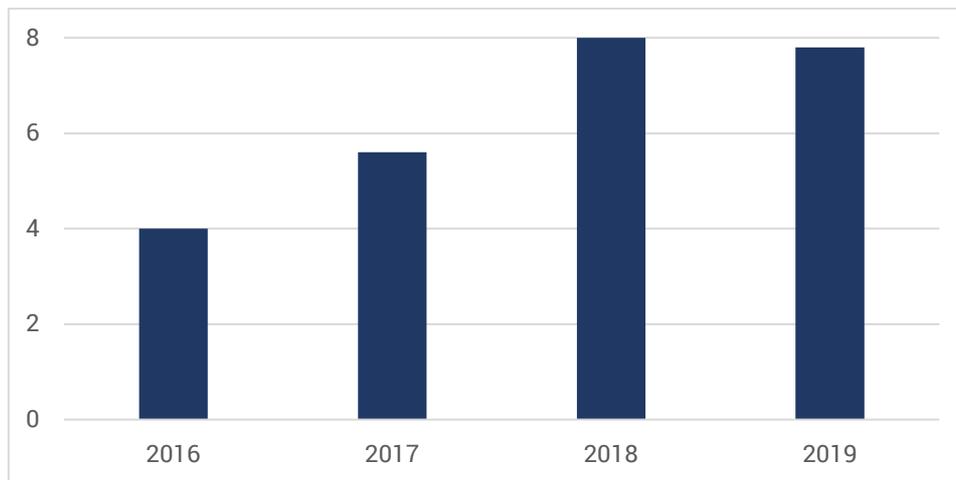


Figure 13: Average number of seafarers taken as hostages during successful attacks against merchant vessels between 2016 and 2019 (Source: Risk Intelligence System).

Figure 13 shows that only four seafarers were taken as hostages in successful attacks against all types of merchant ships in 2016. This number doubled for attacks in 2018 and 2019, leading to tougher and longer ransom negotiations. These can last six to eight weeks, instead of an average of two to four weeks before 2016, meaning that kidnapped seafarers have to endure a longer period of captivity in a hostage camp in the Niger Delta.

Finally, when such a high number of crew members are taken as hostages, additional dangers for the safety of the ship and the remaining crew should also be taken into consideration. Contingency plans are vital to ensure the wellbeing and safety of the seafarers remaining on board who are very likely to be deeply affected and in need of additional support.

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 "Guidelines for Owners, Operators and Masters for protection against piracy and armed robbery in the Gulf of Guinea region", read in conjunction with the Global Counter-Piracy Guidance for Companies, Masters and Seafarers (GCPG), decreases the chance that attackers are able to board any type of vessel at sea. Additional measures, e.g. the use of dedicated escort vessels for transits to and from Nigerian ports and terminals, should 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. The situation remains volatile and should be constantly monitored.

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