



Volume 2 | Issue 2

# Maritime Governance BRIEF

## Gulf of Guinea: Piracy-Graphics 2020

*April 2021*



## EDITOR'S NOTE\*

CEMLAWS Africa's Maritime Governance Brief Volume 2 Issue 1 2020 provided an analysis of Gulf of Guinea (GoG) piracy from January to August 2020. An examination of incidents for the rest of 2020 confirmed the analysis, deductions and conclusions in said Issue.

This Issue provides a graphical overview of 2020 incidents, an illustration of the threat dynamics, trends and increasing risks, as well as how this will likely shape the dynamics for 2021. The paper concludes with a number of recommendations to improve the conditions at sea and hence prevent and contain the piracy threat in the Gulf of Guinea.

## OVERVIEW OF 2020 INCIDENTS

Piracy in the Gulf of Guinea, in 2020, revealed a continuity from previous years as well as new and emerging trends, particularly regarding the modus operandi of Pirate Action Groups (PAGs). In terms of absolute numbers, the statistics show an almost perfect hyperbola in actual incidents at sea when the years 2018, 2019 and 2020 are compared, decreasing from 135 in 2018 to 121 in 2019 and increasing to 130 in 2020 (cf. Figure 1). The subsequent graphical representations depict the identified threat profile.

Type of Attack	2018	2019	2020
Attempted incidents	19	15	20
Suspicious approaches	9	7	19
Boarding	43	15	22
Thefts	11	17	22
Kidnappings	20	24	26
Fired upon incidents	8	12	8
Hijackings	4	2	5
Armed robberies	21	29	8
<b>Total</b>	<b>135</b>	<b>121</b>	<b>130</b>

Figure 1. Overview of incidents for 2018, 2019 & 2020

\* **DISCLOSURE:** The data contained in this report was largely sourced from reports produced under the Yaoundé Architecture.

## SUMMARY OF DYNAMICS AND THREAT PROFILE

While the incidents in 2020 have progressively followed the occurrences from previous years and fit into the piracy profile of the region, there are new trends that deserve detailed analysis (cf. Figure 2). Some of these dynamics are a consolidation of evolving indicators in the immediate past years, others are adaptations to counter-piracy responses, while some are new manifestations. Altogether, these trends have scaled up the insecurity and piracy threat profile in the Gulf of Guinea.



Figure 2. Trends in 2020

### **Range of Attacks**

One progressive trend that has reached its momentum in 2020 is the significant increase in pirates' operational range, manifested by the extended distances from the coastline along which pirate groups conduct their activities.

Up until 2012, pirate attacks across the region were concentrated in coastal areas with the distance of attack averaging less than 40nm from the coastline. As ships increased their distance from the shore to avoid pirates, the latter innovated by using mother vessels to extend their range and subsequently improved their capabilities by using boats with greater endurance. Generally, however, attacks were still not deep into the sea.

A number of attacks in 2018 and 2019 signalled an increasing range of incidents, which has continued exponentially into 2020, with an average distance of 150nm from the coastline (cf. Figure 3). The attack on the chemical tanker *CURACAO TRADER*, which happened at 244nm on 17 July 2020, clearly showed that the range of attacks has taken a new dimension.

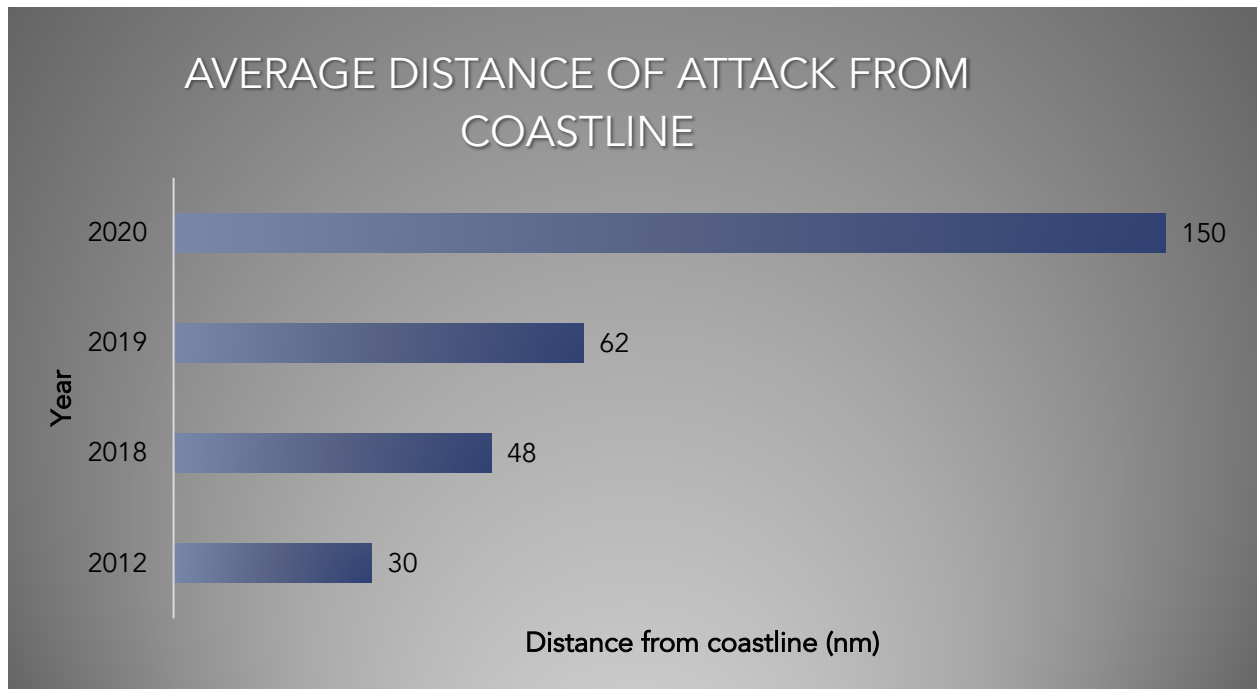


Figure 3. Average distance of attack from coastline

Examples of other deep-sea incidents in 2020 are:

- *IRENES RESOLVE*, 21 February 2020: attack on the Liberia-flagged container ship about **160nm** south-west off Bayelsa State, Nigeria.
- *CAP DIAMANT*, 25 March 2020: suspicious approach on the Liberia-flagged crude oil tanker about **155nm** south-west off Brass, Nigeria.
- *BW TAGUS*, 14 June 2020: suspicious approach on the Singapore-flagged product tanker about **250nm** off the Nigerian coast.
- *MV KOTA BUDI*, 2 July 2020: attack and kidnapping on the Singapore-flagged general cargo vessel about **150nm** off Cotonou, Benin.
- *CURACAO TRADER*, 17 July 2020: attack and kidnapping on the Liberia-flagged product tanker about **224nm** south of Cotonou, Benin.
- *VALLEY OAK*, 11 November 2020: suspicious approach on the Marshall Island-flagged chemical tanker about **198nm** south off Cotonou, Benin.
- *MINERVA EVROPI*, 4 December 2020: fired upon incident on the Greece-flagged crude oil tanker about **230nm** south off Cotonou, Benin.
- *MT VERRAZANE*, 5 December 2020: attempted incident on the France-flagged product tanker about **210nm** south off Lagos, Nigeria.
- *MT NEW RANGER*, 5 December 2020: attack on the Malta-flagged product tanker about **200nm** south off Lagos, Nigeria.

### *Hunt, Fix and Prey*

The increasing range of attacks signifies an important adaptation by pirates to the concurrent responses of the shipping industry and national security enforcement agencies. As vessels sail far from the coastline to avoid attacks, and navies have stepped up counter-piracy patrols, pirates are leap-frogging the patrol lines and 'catching' both their prey and the law enforcement agencies off guard.

Traditionally, such deeper sea attacks are aided by the use of motherships, but there has been no confirmation of the use of such ships in support of incidents in 2020. Thus, one is left to logically conclude that pirates have innovatively adapted to reach deeper at sea, the main elements being faster speedboats, greater endurance, supporting boats, embarkation of resupply fuel and enhanced skills and experience (cf. Figure 4).

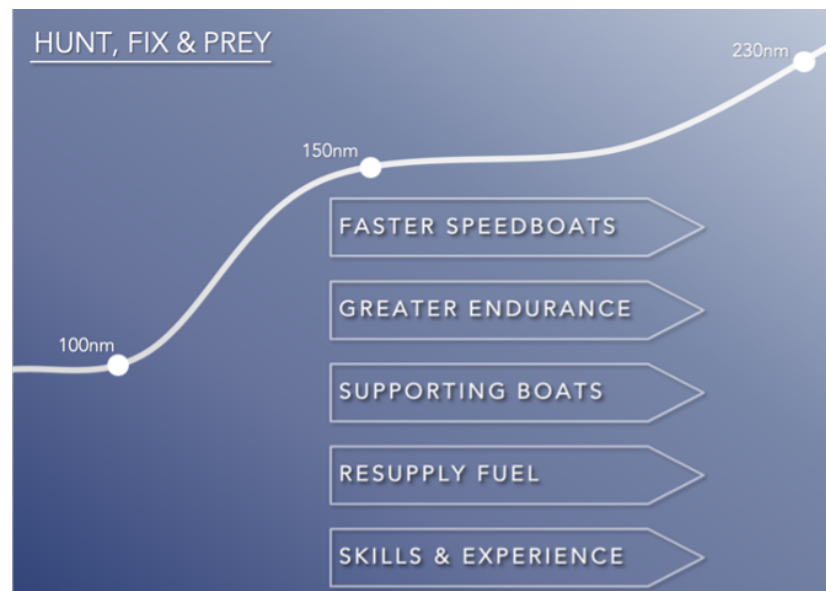


Figure 4. Hunt, fix and prey

### **Spread of Attacks**

In addition to the exponential increase in the depth of attacks, incidents have also spread widely from the primary piracy enclave (Niger Delta Region) across the Gulf of Guinea. This phenomenon, although not entirely new, has become more visible with some new dimensions in 2020.

Piracy attacks have occurred in 9 countries outside the Nigerian hub – Benin, Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Ghana, Sao Tomé and Príncipe and Togo. The geographical spread of incidents in 2020 is equally unique in the sense that the extension unfolded simultaneously in both westwards and south-eastwards directions from Nigeria.

As 2020 came to an end, pirates also registered their presence firmly in Ghana's EEZ, notably with the attack on the Ghanaian-flagged fishing vessel *AP 703*, which resulted in the kidnapping of two foreign crew members. Other pirate activities have occurred in Ghana's territorial waters, such as the attempted attacks on the *MT HAFNIA PHOENIX* (22 September) and the *AGNES 1* (26 September), as well as the attack on the *MV AGISILAOS* on 29 November, which resulted in the kidnapping of 4 crew members. This development is important because, over the years, there have been

fewer attacks in Ghana's coastal area. More importantly, the attacks amplify the increasing insecurity in Zone F, which correlates with the extension of high-risk areas in the Gulf of Guinea region (cf. Figure 5).

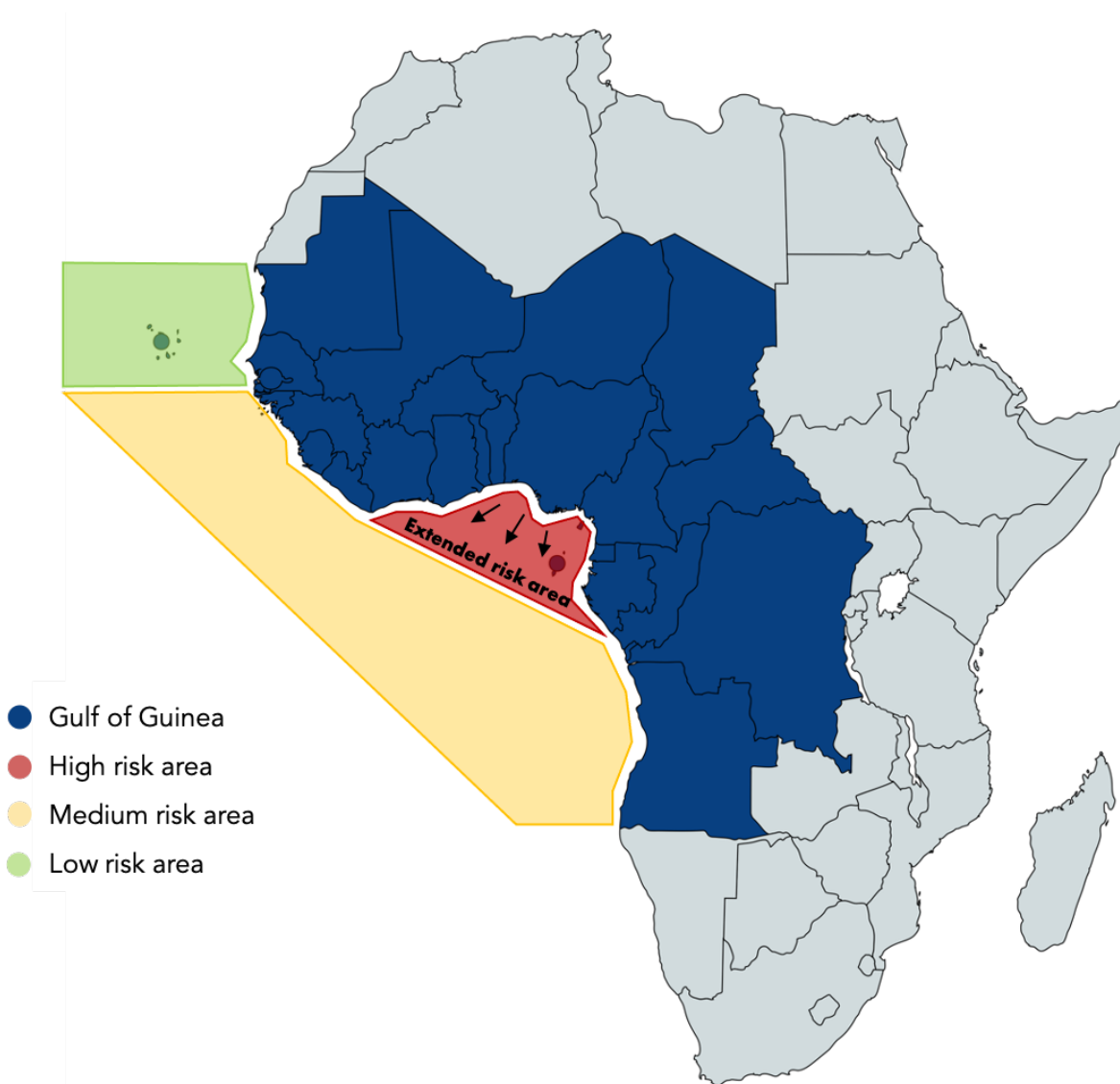


Figure 5. Risk zones in 2020

The emergence of these new hotspots is perhaps an indication that Nigerian counter-piracy efforts are effective, at least in the short term. Thus, the pirates are exploiting the "softest areas". This resilience and adaptation imply that pirates will continue to exploit less monitored/patrolled areas, maintaining their operational threshold, thus representing a widening threat to the safety and security of shipping and seafarers in the region. Pirates in the region are also known to move mainly through the maritime corridors into the territorial waters of other states. However, it is also possible that they are exploiting other means of movement, either by land or sea.

## Mass Kidnapping

A decade review of Gulf of Guinea piracy reveals an interesting evolution regarding kidnapping for ransom (KFR). Earlier in the piracy phase, pirate attention was focused on product tankers, thus giving rise to the petro-piracy terminology. With time, kidnapping became a recurrent trend due to a combination of factors. Arguably, pirates gained a better understanding of the industry's behaviour and consequently found ransom payment a good opportunity to increase their financial inflows. Thus, KFR has been relatively consistent over the past 5-6 years – usually targeting the captain and a few others (especially non-African captains and crew). Overall, the number of kidnapped crew members has increased over the past years, from 108 in 2018 to 142 in 2019 and to 154 in 2020 (cf. Figure 6).

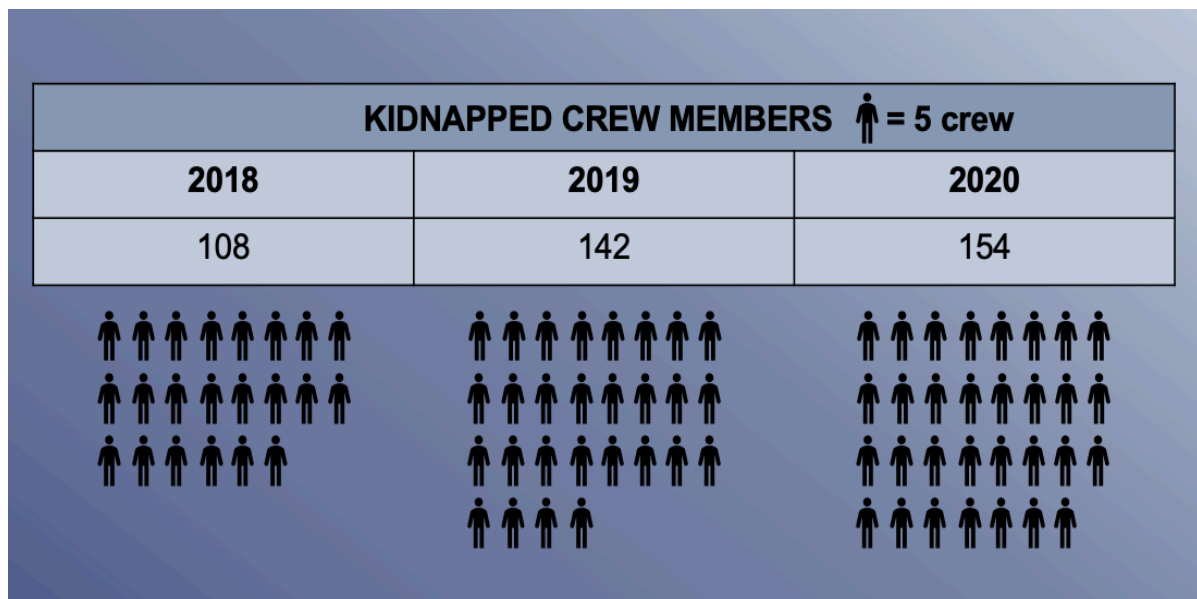


Figure 6. Kidnapped crew members in 2018, 2019 & 2020

However, indications of mass kidnapping emerged towards the end of 2019 and have prevailed in 2020. If we consider the baseline for mass kidnapping incidents to be the kidnapping of 5 or more crew members, which is twice the number from the traditional kidnapping of the captain and an additional crew member (e.g., the chief engineer), the statistics depict a considerable increase from 2018 to 2019, with respectively 6 and 12 cases. This high number of mass kidnapping incidents has continued in 2020, with a total of 13 cases (cf. figure 7).

Year	Total incidents of kidnapping	Specific cases of mass kidnapping (5 or more kidnapped crew members)
2018	20	6
2019	24	12
2020	26	13

Figure 7. Cases of mass kidnapping 2018-2020



The following cases highlight some of the more significant mass kidnapping incidents in 2020:

- *MSC TALIA F*, 22 March 2020: attack on the Portugal-flagged container ship (Gabon) and witnessed the kidnapping of **10 crew members**.
- *TOMMI RITSCHER*, 18 April 2020: attack on the Portugal-flagged container ship (Benin) and witnessed the kidnapping of **8 crew members**.
- *VEMAHOPE*, 30 April 2020: attack on the Panama-flagged product tanker (Nigeria) and witnessed the kidnapping of **10 crew members**.
- *SENDJE BERGE*, 2 July 2020: attack on the Singapore-flagged (Nigeria) and witnessed the kidnapping of **9 crew members**.
- *CURACAO TRADER*, 17 July 2020: attack on the Liberia-flagged product tanker (Benin) and witnessed the kidnapping of **13 crew members**.
- *ZHEN HUA 7*, 13 November 2020: attack on the Liberia-flagged heavy load carrier (Sao Tome and Principe) and witnessed the kidnapping of **14 crew members**.
- *MILAN*, 25 November 2020: attack on the Saint Kitts-flagged cargo vessel (Nigeria) and witnessed the kidnapping of **10 crew members**.
- *M/V STEVIA*, 16 December 2020: attack on the Cameroon-flagged cargo vessel (Nigeria) and witnessed the kidnapping of **8 crew members**.

### **Target Variability**

Attacks in 2020 are also signalling target-variability. Previously, pirate attacks were generally against larger vessels, especially tankers, cargo vessels and offshore support vessels. While there have been cases of attacks against fishing vessels in the past, the analysis of incidents in 2020 shows that fishing vessels are now progressively exposed to piracy attacks. The table below depicts the details of the incidents against fishing vessels in 2020 (cf. Figure 8).

Date	Incident
3 May 2020	<i>AMERGER II &amp; AMERGER VII</i> ; attack on two Senegalese-flagged fishing trawlers off the coast of Gabon
13 May 2020	<i>HAILU FENG 11</i> ; hijacking of Chinese-flagged fishing trawler off the coast of Côte d'Ivoire
24 June 2020	<i>PANOFI FRONTIER</i> ; attack on Ghanaian-flagged fishing vessel off the coast of Benin
21 August 2020	<i>SHENGHAI2</i> ; attack on Chinese-flagged fishing vessel on Freetown Anchorage, Sierra Leone
28 August 2020	<i>AP 703</i> ; hijacking of Ghanaian-flagged fishing vessel off the coast of Ghana
26 September 2020	<i>AGNES 1</i> ; attempted boarding of Ghanaian-flagged fishing vessel off the coast of Ghana
1 October 2020	<i>LIBERTY GRACE</i> ; suspicious approach on the Liberian-flagged fishing vessel 174nm south-west of Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire

Figure 8. Attacks on fishing vessels in 2020



A number of explanations may account for the trend of attacks on fishing vessels. Perhaps this new paradigm flows logically from the fact that ransom piracy has now become dominant, and since the target is the crew rather than the vessel or cargo, all types of vessels are susceptible to attacks. Secondly, fishing vessels may be softer targets; while larger vessels have acquired or employed advanced security measures, fishing trawlers remain vulnerable. Thirdly, it is also possible that the engagement of fishing vessels in illicit activities, notably illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing, is leaving them susceptible to piracy attacks. A fourth hypothesis is the possible emergence of a new PAG or a scheme of piracy franchising that is targeting fishing vessels.

### **Agility and Swiftness**

As piracy emerged in the Gulf of Guinea a decade ago, pirates were visibly on the frontline. As a parasitic activity to militancy, pirate activities were generally noticeable and characterised by openly carrying weapons and firefights with security forces. It was also common to see multiple pirate boats chasing vessels. This posture of insurgent-piracy persisted even after the cessation of militant activities following the amnesty in 2009.

Gulf of Guinea pirates have, however, progressively changed their tactics and are much more discreet in their operations. They have also perfected their skills and ability to conduct very swift operations leaving limited foot or sea prints. A classic incident is the attack on the *TOMMI RITSCHER* at Cotonou anchorage on 18 April 2020, which the timeline below illustrates (cf. Figure 9).

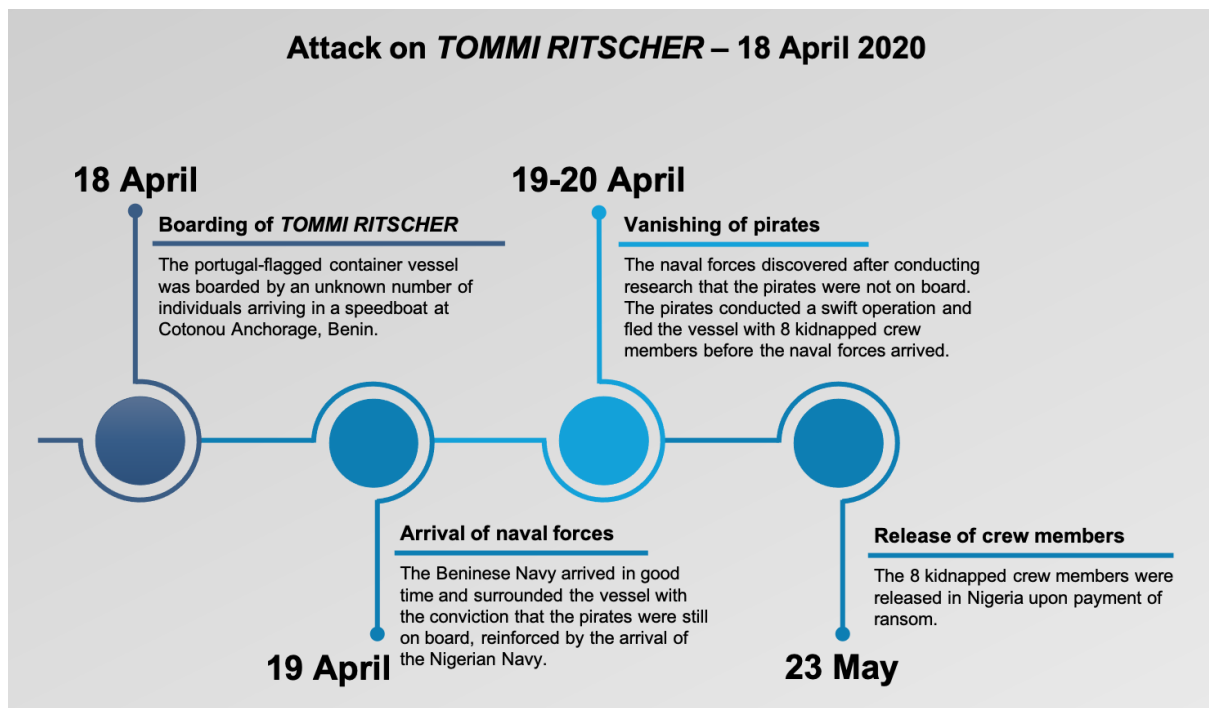


Figure 9. Timeline of attack on TOMMI RITSCHER

Accounts of the attack and kidnapping of the crew from the *PANOFI FRONTIER*, off Cotonou on 24 June 2020, further confirmed the agility and swiftness of pirates. Same deduction can be made regarding the multiple attacks on the *MT NEW RANGER*, which was boarded thrice on the 5, 6 and 15 December 2020.

### **Improved Business Model**

As pirates' strategy developed over time, so has the opportunity to enlarge the operational and financial scheme accompanying it. Indeed, a business model of piracy is becoming a significant aspect of the Gulf of Guinea, particularly as criminal groups have shifted from thefts and robberies to KFR. The network required to sustain the KFR model of piracy is larger than the traditional case of piracy cargo stealing. This includes negotiators, intermediaries, facilitators and racketeers who will be part of the piracy network, as well as individuals acting in an official or professional capacity such as insurance and risk analyst, professional negotiators and security companies. Therefore, there is a blend of actors – the pirates and their associates or networks and legitimate or pseudo-legitimate actors – all practically sustaining the business model. There is also a high level of secrecy surrounding negotiation, payment and the true identity of both the criminal and legitimate actors. The cyclical KFR business model, including the various actors and the money flow, is summarised below (cf. Figure 10).

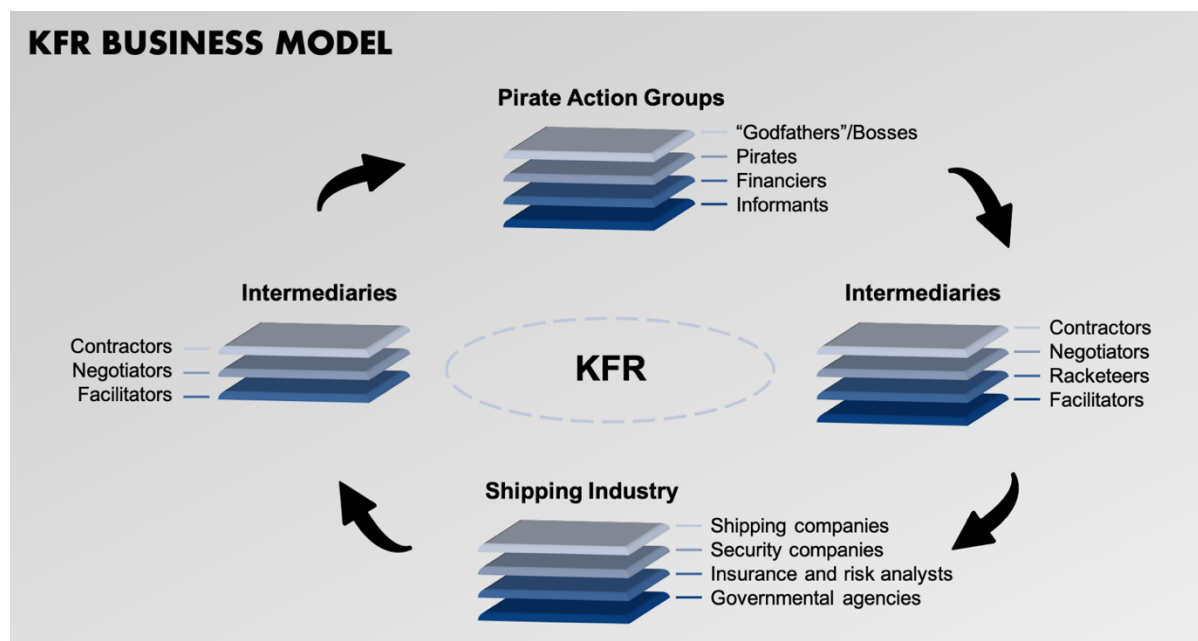


Figure 10. KFR Business Model

The figure particularly emphasises the role of intermediaries, as well as the multiplicity of involved actors. Indeed, the role of the intermediaries becomes paramount in terms of facilitating the ransom payment and the ensuing release of the kidnapped crew members. This trend is likely to prevail in 2021, as KFR has proven to be a lucrative activity for PAGs, enabling them to maintain and improve their modus operandi.

## LOOKING FORWARD

As 2020 came to an end, the need to prevent, halt, counter and contain piracy and illicit activities in the Gulf of Guinea is ever prevailing. Security enforcement agencies and the shipping industry are adjusting their response mechanisms to criminal groups' ingenuity and resourcefulness and vice versa, which has resulted in an on-going and complex cycle. Developments on both sides have been significant over the last decade, from the adoption of the Yaoundé Architecture in 2013 to the expansion of piracy networks across the region.

Efforts are being made to share information and intercept maritime criminals by maritime stakeholders at all levels, including national Maritime Operation Centres (MOCs), Multi-National Maritime Coordination Centres (MMCCs), sub-regional centres (CRESMAO and CRESMAC), regional institutions (i.e., ICC) and the shipping industry. Yet, the threat has enlarged both in-depth and across the region.

The year 2021 continues to present challenges to the global community and indeed, incidents in the first few months of the year point to greater piracy threat and activities. With 23 incidents recorded so far from Ghana to Gabon, including 2 hijackings, 2 cases of mass kidnapping and 7 cases taking place beyond 150nm from the coastline, the identified threat profile of 2020 is set to advance into 2021.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- Effective cooperation through coordinated maritime law enforcement activities focusing on addressing the spread and range of attacks
- Improvement of the relations between local law enforcement agencies and the shipping industry, including trust-building through information-sharing
- Increase efforts at protecting fishing vessels, involving the development of best management practices (BMP) documents for fishing vessels
- Enhancement of the capacity of law enforcement agencies, including information-sharing and assets, to suppress PAGs
- Integration of the air forces into maritime law enforcement efforts