

**BENIN/NIGERIA: NIGERIAN PIRATES MAIN SUSPECTS  
BEHIND UPSURGE OF PIRACY IN GULF OF GUINEA**

*By ESISC TEAM*

**Following the recent surge in pirate attacks off the coast of West Africa and in the Gulf of Guinea, shipping companies are becoming increasingly concerned of the threat posed by these pirates.** Over the last three years, piracy in the Gulf of Guinea has been growing constantly, a fact that is also linked to the strategic interest for the energy reserves in the Gulf of Guinea. **This year, there have been twelve attacks in total off Cotonou, the economic capital of Benin and six of these attacks were reported in May and four others this week.** Of these twelve attacks, **five vessels were hijacked, prompting the International Maritime Bureau (IMB) to issue a warning for vessels travelling off Benin,** where over twelve tankers were attacked since March last year in an area which was considered free of pirates last year.

**The latest successful attacks targeted an unidentified Panama-flagged vessel, the Swedish-owned Panamanian-flagged *Gotland Sofia*, the Panamanian-flagged *Golden Sidia* and *Aidin Panama*, and the Italian oil vessel *Rdb Anema e Core*.** The Beninois navy managed to prevent hijackings and detained some attackers, although it has to be pointed out that **the *Rdb. Anema e Core* was seized by three heavily armed men some 23 nautical miles (43) kilometres south of Cotonou.** This hijacking came after Confitarma, the Italian ship owners association, urged its members to take armed guards aboard, following the February hijacking of the Italian oil tanker *MV Savina Caylyn* off Yemen's Socotra Island, as barbed wire and water cannons proved to be "insufficient" to deter pirate attacks. Other attacks targeted Swedish and Greek vessels in recent weeks. Up until now, only one person was found death following the May attack on a vessel off Benin.

Although largely escaping media attention compared to the reports on piracy off the Horn of Africa, this recent wave of attacks has turned the Gulf of Guinea into a new hotbed of piracy. **However, a large difference with their Somali counterparts is the fact that the pirates operating off the coasts of Benin, Nigeria and Guinea do not seem to be after ransom payments.**

**If the pirates are not in it for the ransom, than what are their motives? This could be answered if we take look at the targets of these pirate**

**attacks, as almost all of them are oil vessels.** The hijacked vessels are forced to sail to unknown locations, where pirates ransacked and stole the ship's equipment.

Some other attacks reported on vessels off Benin and Nigeria were mere armed robberies as criminals board ships in hit-and-run robberies, making off with whatever they can steal.

**The prime suspect is said to be a Nigeria-based criminal group which is in it for the oil revenues, hijacking passing oil tankers and ordering them to offload fuel, which is then sold on the black market.** Given the fact that West Africa has a big black market for fuel, it can be sold almost everywhere, from Abidjan in Côte d'Ivoire to Port Gentil in Gabon. **The fact that there are reports of Nigerian nationals detained in one of the thwarted attacks this week underscores this hypothesis.**

**According to analysts, the pattern and sudden increase of attacks in the area could be traced back to one group, which has a fairly high level of organisation.** Moreover, **this level of organisation is needed, as a specific system is required to enable the extraction of the oil from the vessel.** Some reports indicate that the oil is transferred to a separate vessel, which could anchor in any port with a large quantity of stolen oil.

**Nigeria – Africa's largest oil producer – has a history of piracy and oil bunkering ever since the first oil was exported in 1958.** Sea raiders operate in the volatile and oil-rich Niger Delta and according to some Nigerian naval sources; these men are behind the upsurge of piracy. Moreover, these sources add that the men could have moved into neighbouring Benin following increased operations conducted by the Nigerian authorities against these suspected pirates.

**It has to be reminded that since 2009, ESISC has reported that pirates are operating on the disputed Bakassi Peninsula, located on the border between Nigeria and Cameroon.** Although, we cannot rule out whether these groups are linked to the alleged Nigerian gang, it has to be pointed out that these pirates demanded ransoms and some of these attacks were claimed by the MEND (Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta) and the Bakassi Freedom Fighters.

**It is not unlikely that if the international community or the countries in which the pirates operate are unable to curtail this outbreak of piracy, it will spread even further and will lead to a wave of attacks, which will not merely target oil ships.** According to a recently published report from Norway-based Bergen Risk Solutions, this is already the case as from May onwards; the group has expanded its operational range, targeting more than just petroleum vessels as they are possibly supported by local criminals from Benin.