

In West Africa, a new threat to Indian sailors

An Analysis by Mahesh Sachdev

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There is a spike in the kidnapping of sailors in the Gulf of Guinea. India must find ways to address it.



What recourse does India and the international community have against non-State actors such as the pirates stalking the West African shores?

The Gulf of Guinea is increasingly unsafe for Indian sailors. Last month, pirates kidnapped two Indian oil tankers there and took Indian crew hostages. On December 3, they kidnapped 16 sailors, and on December 15, another 20. While the first group was released on December 23, the second is still in captivity.

Such incidents involving Indian sailors in the Gulf of Guinea are becoming more frequent for at least three reasons. First, over past few years, the Gulf of Guinea — running along Africa's Atlantic coast from Senegal to Angola — has emerged as the world's kidnapping hot spot with 82% of the global share. While Somali piracy has declined, the slack has been taken up by the West African crime syndicates, mostly based in Nigeria's oil-rich, thickly forested Niger Delta. Second, India's seaborne trade with West Africa has gone up as our oil procurement from Nigeria makes us the country's largest trading partner. This has pushed up the number of our vessels, both Indian as well as chartered, frequenting the region's ports. Third, the number of our sailors on high seas has risen by 45% in the past three years, and stands at over two lakh. India is now among the top three suppliers of seamen, with around 12.8% of officers and around 14.5% of ratings shares in the world seafaring community.

The spurt in kidnapping in the Gulf of Guinea is rooted in a number of local factors as well. It includes relatively weak navies and coast guards of the littoral states, unemployed youth and a simmering insurgency in the Niger Delta, leading to the proliferation of weapons, fast boats and easy hiding options in creaks. The perpetrators often enjoy strong political patronage. The kidnapping for ransom on land has long been rampant in the region, but it now extends to offshore. These crime syndicates also engage in oil pipeline vandalism, protection money racketeering, and bunkering crude to sell it on the high seas. In a vicious cycle, the "profits" so acquired are often ploughed back into procuring more lethal hardware and to attract more recruits. The syndicates now have a capacity to go

further deep offshore and operate virtually unchallenged across the Gulf of Guinea's 2.35 million square kilometre expanse.

A degree of cynicism permeates the kidnapping ecosystem. The risk premium for the crew's kidnapping is pre-factored into by the maritime insurers, who negotiate for the release of the kidnapped sailors and pay the ransom. Thus, neither the ship owners, nor the crew management companies bear the direct consequences of the game. The kidnapers know well that the hostages are worth the ransom only if they are kept alive. Therefore, unlike political kidnappings, the kidnapped sailors are not harmed as long as they do not resist or try to escape.

Seasonal surge in kidnapping for a month from mid-November is no coincidence. The hostage takers are on the prowl to fatten their purses to splurge on Christmas festivities. When approached, local authorities go through comb the seas and raid usual hideouts, but with little success. Most of the time, the hostages are released after the insurer's local agent and the kidnapers haggle and whittle down the ransom to a mutually agreeable figure. On an average, the process takes around two weeks.

The sailors and their dependents are the main hapless victims of the sordid saga. Although not physically harmed, the sailors are roughed up and suffer immense trauma. Ironically, some victims suffer from the Stockholm Syndrome, and end up sympathising with the same thugs.

What recourse does India and the international community have against such non-State actors? Stopping trade with West Africa, or prohibiting the seafarers from venturing into the region are clearly not viable options. The tactics deployed in decimating the Somali piracy can be applied here as well, with an international naval task force for the Gulf of Guinea.

Though the two situations have similarities, there are major differences as well. The hardware used in West Africa is more lethal and sophisticated, but are still no match to the professional navies with access to technologies such as satellite and aerial tracking. While the Somalia coast was ungoverned, West Africa has weak governments which often regard piracy as someone else's problem. They need help to augment their capacity and steel their resolve. Bringing the perpetrators to the International Criminal Court can be a deterrent.

At the national level, we need a better awareness campaign for seafarers to help them avoid such threats and learn survival tactics for such adverse situations. Among the good signs is the Anti-Maritime Piracy Bill, 2019, which was tabled in the Lok Sabha last month, prescribing life imprisonment and death for the pirates. It must be urgently passed in the Parliament to fill the legal lacuna for such crimes. *(853 words)*

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The views expressed are personal.*