

Innocent seafarers caught in vulnerable socio-economic-political climate of Gulf of Guinea region



Chirag Bahri, ISWAN Director of Regions

We often hear frightening stories of seafarers who are either kidnapped or taken hostage by pirates when their ships are attacked by heavily armed militia or so-called ‘pirates of the Gulf of Guinea region’. Until a few years ago, most of the ships hijacked by pirates were used for siphoning of cargo, mostly product oil, from the tanks and transferring it to another smaller hijacked ship. The cargo would then be sold off in the grey market. However, due to the various efforts of regional states and robust actions by law enforcement agencies, this no longer remains a sustainable option.

As shown by the ICC International Maritime Bureau (IMB) annual report of 2016, the Gulf of Guinea region has been very volatile – 34 seafarers were kidnapped in nine separate incidents that year. However, in 2017, the number of crew kidnapped by pirates rose to 65. By the year 2018, the numbers saw a sharp increase – 130 seafarers were taken as hostages, including 78 seafarers who were kidnapped from vessels. In 2019, 35 incidents were reported and in the last two months of the year alone, more than 60 seafarers were kidnapped by pirates in the Gulf of Guinea region. Many reports suggest that there is underreporting in this crucial and oil-rich region so there is no clarity on the exact number of actual incidents.

What happens to seafarers when they are kidnapped?

ISWAN spoke with a number of seafarers who were held in captivity by pirates to learn more about their ordeals. Seafarers are shocked and sometimes panicked at the time of incident. One of the seafarer recalled: ‘I was totally numb...seeing a fully armed pirate standing in front of me and shouting at us.’ Pirates use terrifying techniques such as firing on the ship or into the air to scare seafarers as they have limited time to complete their task once they

board the vessel. The pirates then muster the crew members, who have no clue about the pirates’ intentions or whether they will harm them, and ask them to disembark and quickly get down into the pirates’ boat(s). One seafarer recalled that the boats his crew boarded had very powerful Yamaha twin engines, which can develop at least 25-30 knot speed.



Crew members are taken by boat for at least a 10- to 24-hour ride until they reach a safe location in the oil-rich Niger Delta region, then shifted to a temporary base camp where other members of the pirates’ group await their arrival. One of the seafarers said: ‘As soon as the group saw crew on boats, they started firing (bullets) in air in celebration and shouting slogans of victory.’

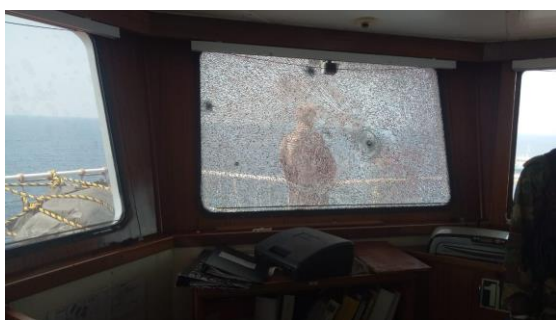
Living in a swampy area with hardly any kind of protection is highly traumatic and one cannot really imagine this. A seafarer who spent nearly 30 days in captivity said: ‘We slept on makeshift wooden planks, wet and very stinky mattress, in an area full of wild insects, sometimes snakes and crabs were easily visible. There is no sunlight inside the dense forest and there is always a danger to get infected or even one can die in such scenarios.’

Pirates do not normally physically assault their captives but living in such an environment is enough of an ordeal for the crew, who are often the sole breadwinners of their families. Skin infections and malaria are quite common, but ISWAN has recently heard of at least two

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crew members from different ships who died while in captivity due to a lack of urgent medical care.

The crew are normally held in captivity for nearly four to six weeks on an average. Most of the time, almost all crew members return home without any casualties. However, they are only fed once or twice a day and given limited water to drink, causing them to lose weight. The enormous stress of their ordeal has a significant impact on their mental health.



Damage after a pirate attack in the Gulf of Guinea

Who are these pirates and why do they opt to kidnap innocent seafarers?

Pirates are generally locals who are heavily armed and part of criminal enterprises, normally employing violent means to attack a vessel and either hijack it or kidnap its seafarers. Without going into the legality of whether an attack needs to be termed as piracy attack or armed robbery, in every such incident, the motive of the captors revolves around a business model. Severe political disputes, youth unemployment, poverty and lack of cooperation among regional states in tackling crime could be a few of the major factors that have contributed to youth falling prey to working for such illicit gangs. Easy availability of drugs and weapons, coupled with the desire to get huge ransom amounts by kidnapping crew from ships or employees from industries ashore, has deepened the crisis. Poor law enforcement, the absence of a legal mechanism to prosecute pirates and limited

resources to tackle such crimes have previously enabled pirate activity to flourish.

One seafarer recalled what a pirate had told him during his time in captivity: 'We have been neglected for years; our island does not receive what we should get. We are educated but do not have any jobs. We also have to feed our families and our children. We also stay away from our family for months preparing for an attack, carrying out an attack which can be very dangerous for our life and till we get ransom amount which is the only means of our survival.'

What has been done so far by states and industry?

There are, however, various initiatives being taken by the regional states to cooperate and promote a regional, maritime, information-sharing mechanism under the Yaounde Code of Conduct. This was adopted in June 2013 when signatory states committed to arresting, investigating and prosecuting persons who have committed piracy. Recently, the Nigerian Government has enacted a law on suppression of piracy and a maritime offences bill, which aims to ensure safe and secure shipping at sea, prosecute infractions and criminalise piracy. This has been welcomed but it remains to be seen how it will be implemented in the country across the regions.



Photo: Mohamed Dahir, AFP, Getty Images

The maritime industry was already recovering from the incidents of piracy off the Gulf of

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Aden, where notorious Somali pirates used to hijack ships and their crew for months and sometimes years. With an increase in incidents off the Gulf of Guinea, the industry's leading bodies came together and, in June 2018, launched Global Counter Piracy Guidance for Companies, Masters and Seafarers. Various governmental and intergovernmental delegations and conferences were organised to highlight the issues around a state's responsibility in the Gulf of Guinea region to ensure safe and secure passage for a ship and its crew. This would be within the framework of international conventions such as UNCLOS (United Nations Convention on the Law of the Seas), SOLAS (Safety of Life at Sea) and SUA (Suppression of Unlawful Acts against the Safety of Maritime Navigation), as amended. The industry body is also working on launching Best Management Practices (BMP) for West Africa.

Various other initiatives have been taken up by such bodies with the states, proving that the issue of piracy in Gulf of Guinea waters remains very concerning for stakeholders.

So, what does it mean for seafarers and what can they do?

A seafarer has to face various challenges at sea and is often successful in mitigating such threats and risks. Looking back at the statistics, the probability that a seafarer is ever kidnapped or their vessel hijacked by pirates is very low. However, there is a considerable amount of stress and fear for the seafarer and their family whenever they have to transit or call at a port in such high risk areas. Every shipping company has laid down their procedures and instructions to be followed by a seafarer during crisis on board, so seafarers need to be fully aware of these and familiarise themselves with the latest information.

Drills are normally carried out on every vessel and it is good practice to include a drill on how

to muster in a citadel. Emergency items in the citadel should also be regularly checked to see if they are available in sufficient numbers and in working condition. Every seafarer has a responsibility at a time of crisis and he/she needs to coordinate with his/her colleagues to mitigate the associated risks.



Photo: Barathan Anthony Arun

Knowledge on reporting centres is crucial and a seafarer should understand when and how to report an incident to such a centre. For West Africa, MDAT-GoG is a designated reporting centre and IMB PRC is for worldwide attacks. Time is crucial during an attack – seafarers should act quickly so law enforcement agencies can reach the vessel and assist the crew under attack. An incident can go either way and seafarers are under immense pressure to act. Sometimes, a senior-ranked seafarer may make a mistake, whereas a junior officer or even a rating can help his colleagues to guide them on what best to do during such a stressful period.

Learning coping skills for captivity and being able to apply the immense knowledge and expertise in navigation through busy waters does help a seafarer in many ways. They can apply such practices at the time of an attack by keeping proper lookouts, cooperating with the captors/pirates while being held hostage and offering no resistance, staying united with colleagues, and devoting some of their time

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towards yoga, meditation and other spiritual beliefs (if allowed).

It is challenging and very tough for a seafarer and their family, but once a seafarer returns home, he/she needs good support coupled with love, care and affection from his/her family and the shipping company. This will help the seafarer leave the difficult and hard memories behind them and look forward to a bright future, where he/she has now gained immense wisdom and maturity having successfully dealt with a severe crisis. Most seafarers have done extremely well post-return and always prove to be assets for their companies and society.

A few recommendations that may help, going forward:

- The root cause of the problem needs to be addressed and governments must initiate measures to improve living standards and ensure opportunities for youth employment
- Effective policing for the region and resources needed for law enforcement must be looked at
- Cooperation among the states, including information sharing and enactment of strict laws which prohibit and discourage illicit activities, must be encouraged
- Training of seafarers is needed to sensitise them on coping skills during captivity and increase their awareness on hardening their ships, including usage of the citadel and other measures to prevent pirates boarding a ship
- Shipping companies may refer to [guidance](#) issued by ISWAN on humanitarian support of seafarers and their families in cases of armed robbery and piracy attack

Most importantly, the states must work with various regional and local stakeholders with a willingness to improve the current adverse scenario into a safer and more secure sea, which can bring prosperity and peace in the region

Chirag Bahri joined ISWAN in 2015 after the Maritime Piracy Humanitarian Response Programme (MPHRP) moved into ISWAN. As Director of Regions, he is responsible for the operation and development of ISWAN's work activities in South Asia, particularly India. In 2019, he was tasked with the additional responsibility to develop and manage the ongoing work programme in South East Asia and Nigeria. He works with regional stakeholders to provide support mechanisms for seafarers and their families in need. He began his shipping career in India in 2004 after graduating as a Marine Engineer and has worked on various merchant vessels in different capacities, currently holding a Chief Engineer's License. Chirag was held hostage by Somali pirates on a hijacked vessel in 2010 and has devoted his life to helping seafarers and their families affected by piracy and many other challenges. His passion to serve seafarers has gained widespread recognition, and he has received prestigious national and international awards.