

Nigeria: 12 foreign sailors kidnapped by pirates

By JON GAMBRELL (AP) – Jul 3, 2010

LAGOS, Nigeria — Pirates kidnapped 12 foreign sailors off the coast of Nigeria's restive and oil-rich southern delta during an attack that left one crew member injured, a naval spokesman said Saturday.

Commodore David Nabaïda told The Associated Press that pirates boarded the German-flagged cargo ship BBC Palonia Friday night off the coast of the Niger Delta near the Bonny River fairway. A struggle broke out during the attack and pirates shot one crew member in the leg during the fight, Nabaïda said.

Nabaïda said the Nigerian navy escorted the ship to safe waters and transported the wounded Ukrainian sailor to a local hospital. The sailor was in stable condition Saturday afternoon, he said.

"All efforts are being made to ... rescue the kidnapped crew," the commodore said.

Nabaïda said the navy had suspects in mind for the attack, but declined to offer further details. He said the crew consisted of sailors from Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Russia and Ukraine.

The attack comes after 12 pirates in speed boats attacked a bulk carrier in the same area June 27. The International Maritime Bureau, which tracks piracy worldwide, reported that the pirates shot at crew members with locally made firearms while trying to board the ship. Crew members repelled the attack using a slingshot, the bureau said. One sailor suffered a minor injury during the assault.

Such attacks have been common in the Niger Delta, a region of swamps, mangrove fields and creeks almost the size of South Carolina. Militants have kidnapped oil workers, bombed crude pipelines and fought with government troops since an insurrection began there in 2006. While a government-sponsored amnesty deal has slowed violence in recent months, analysts worry the program has begun to fray as weapons remain plentiful in the impoverished region.

Friday's attack is just the latest as acts of piracy increase in the Gulf of Guinea, especially along Nigeria's 530 miles of coastline.

Africa's most populous country remains a target-rich environment full of oil barges and oil company ships off the delta, one of the U.S.' top sources of crude oil. Cargo ships off the coast of the megacity of Lagos also fall under pirate attacks as they wait to unload their goods at the city's busy and mismanaged ports.

The maritime bureau reported 28 attacks off Nigeria during 2009. The bureau also believes at least another 30 pirate attacks went unreported, either due to companies worrying about having higher insurance premiums or concerns about advertising their security weaknesses.

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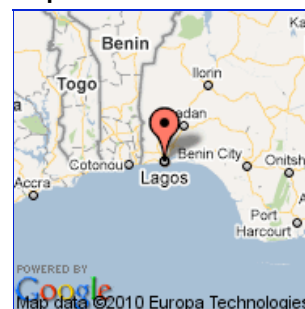
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