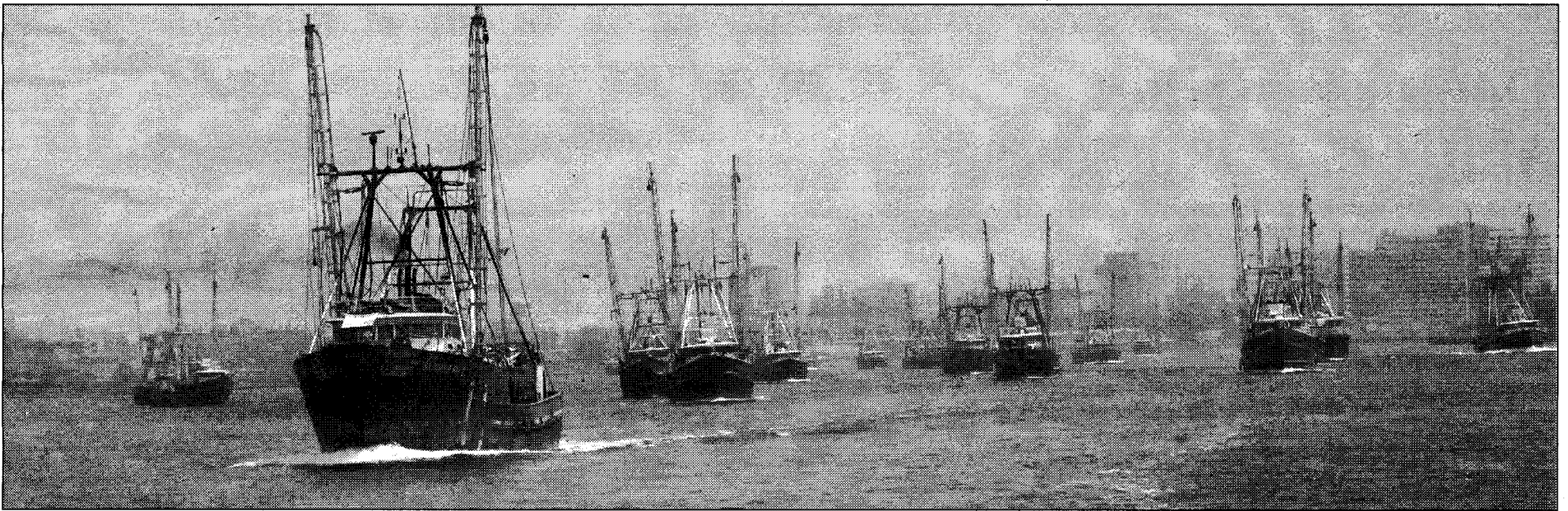




Pirates threaten fish on the table



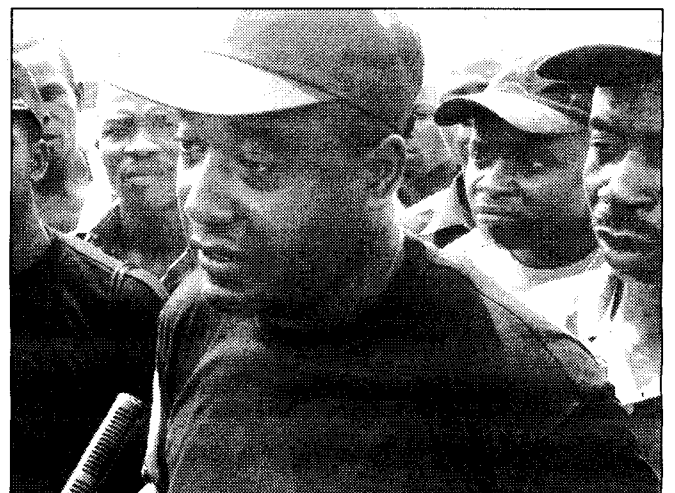
• Trawlers belonging to the Nigerian Trawler Owners Association (NTOA) on their way to the Naval Base at Apapa last Thursday.



• Onyema-Orakwusi



• Members of the Nigerian Trawler Workers Association



• Egbagbe

PHOTOS: ROTIMI OYEKANMI

At the last count, seven trawler workers have been gunned down by sea pirates, threatening mass protest by trawler workers, as fish crisis looms large.

CAPTAIN Akindeko Egbagbe, a seaman with the West Coast Fisheries Limited, was in no mood for banter last Thursday, when he faced a battery of reporters to talk about his recent painful experiences on the high seas.

Dressed in black like his several other colleagues, who had gathered at the Nigerian Institute of Oceanography and Marine Research (NIOMR) jetty, Lagos to stage a peaceful protest, under the aegis of the Nigeria Fishing Trawler Workers Association (NFTWA), Egbagbe looked very agitated as he narrated his story.

"What is happening out there (on the high seas) is beyond words," his voice was hard. "Those labouring to feed this country are being killed with impunity by pirates. Some of our members who were killed recently are still in the morgue. It is a very serious matter. And unless the government takes a very firm action about those guys, one day, they will be so daring that they will turn up at the State House."

Egbagbe was not the only agitated one. Several other members of the association gave heart-rending accounts of how pirates had formed the habit of killing their colleagues "with so much ease, and with no help from the security forces." Mr Victor Osobekce, a cook with one of the trawlers was more concise. "What we have out there, on the Nigerian shores, is an illegal government run by pirates. It's like another republic existing on Nigeria's territorial waters."

The NFTWA members are employees of the Nigerian Trawler Owners Association (NTOA), a body founded in the early 90s, representing a conglomerate of licensed companies which are into commercial fishing on Nigeria's territorial waters. With one voice, the association decided last week, to withdraw its entire fleet of 170 vessels due to what its officials described as a dangerous upsurge in brutal killings of seamen by heartless pirates.

But if the vessels are kept off the high seas for two weeks for instance, the entire country could, according to NTOA executive members, begin to experience a scarcity of fish. Besides, Mrs Margaret Onyema-Orakwusi, the first Vice President of NTOA noted that since fish was the largest non-oil foreign exchange earner in the country, a lot of revenue would also be lost. "But nothing compares to the lives of our employees that the pirates are taking at will," she agonised.

By Rotimi Lawrence Oyeekanmi

The co-ordinated efforts by the NTOA to draw national attention to the killings began about 10 days ago. The sudden elimination of five crew members of two vessels belonging to the association by pirates in the Niger Delta zone, a few weeks ago, appeared to be the last straw, something the trawler owners could not manage again.

"Yes, our vessels had suffered pockets of attacks in the past," Onyema - Orakwusi confirmed. "But there is now an upsurge, and the brutal way the pirates kill our men is very painful to us. The latest killings bring to seven the total number of our personnel killed on the high seas by pirates since January."

She continued: "We were told that in the latest attack, the pirates asked the crew members to cook for them on the vessel they had attacked. They ate, slept, woke up and continued with the looting. They had enough time because there was nobody to challenge them."

After an emergency meeting of the association last week, Onyema-Orakwusi told *The Guardian* that the NTOA had, before now, been facing significant difficulties and that the recent spate of killings only compounded members' challenges. "First, we operate 24 hours on diesel," she explained. "Ours is like an industry on the sea. Our vessels are fully equipped with facilities to not only catch the fishes and shrimps, but to also preserve them. With other industries on land, they can switch to electricity supplied by the Power Holding Company (PHCN). But with us, there is no such luxury. We use only diesel. That is why we want the government to consider a form of subsidy for us."

On why the pirates find the fishing trawlers so attractive, she said "the equipment we use are very expensive. Our echo sounders and fish finders which cost millions of naira are attractive to the pirates. Once they come on board, the first thing they do is to remove such equipment. Then the catch is attractive to them too. Our trawlers spend up to 20 to 30 days on a trip, and the catch comes quite handy for them. They impound the catch and, in some cases, commandeer the vessels into the creeks where they spend days offloading. They can find a ready market for the fish."

"The implications of these spate of attacks are quite many," according to Onyema - Orakwusi. "We are talking about over 50 direct and indirect jobs, now on the line. We have withdrawn our vessels, that means no revenue, and when we are taking the vessels back, we would have to spend millions to put them back in shape. We earned \$65 million last year. We pay 14.5 per cent duty in Europe. We are the most monitored in this country. We are regulated by European laws too. Our vessels must get approval to operate on European waters. Our cold rooms are given European numbers. Health Certificates are required for our products. Yet, poachers encroach on our territorial waters to fish. They come, catch our fish, compete with us, whereas we cannot go to their own countries to do the same without license. It is because nobody is challenging them, too. The burden on us is so much. We want the government to listen to us."

But even if government accommodates the prayers of the NTOA, the issue of security is what bothers the NFTWA the most. With their employers joining in for last week's peaceful protest, the workers insist that they would not return to the high seas unless adequate measures were put in place to protect their lives.

However, the NTOA cannot, on its own, provide adequate security for its vessels and employees. Both Egbagbe and Onyema - Orakwusi agreed that only the federal government could match the pirates in terms of sophisticated weapons. Asked why the NTOA cannot arrange its own security, Onyema - Orakwusi shook her head slowly and said, "we are not talking about luxurious buses here. Have you ever seen those guys? When they come, they come really armed, with sub-machine guns and a belt of bullets tied around their bodies. How do you want us to confront those ones?"

The Guardian was informed that Captain Nana Tayo and 42 - year - old Odede Onovirakpo, who left five young children behind, were among those killed recently. The fear among the workers is rubbing off on their spouses too. Captain Smart - Alli Rotimi who works with Banarly Fishing Company confirmed that "our wives have been telling their husbands to resign." Already, 10 seamen have obeyed either their wives or instincts within the last week.

More importantly, however, Egbagbe also

sounded an alarm. He alleged that all the villages, from 20 nautical miles off the nation's shores, are being used as warehouses for sophisticated weapons. He warned that with the rate things were going, the country could erupt in a major conflict within "the next couple of months."

The workers listed several complaints. They affirmed that Nigeria's territorial waters were no longer safe. They alleged that the sea pirates' attacks have now stopped fishing operations in the country. They declared that widespread killings are going on unabated on the high seas too. They also insist that some of the weapons stolen from the government are being used to cripple the fishing industry. They demanded that the federal government "must stop the killings."

At the Federal Ministry of Agriculture's Department of Fisheries where Onyema - Orakwusi led other executive members of the NTOA to deliver a letter for onward delivery to the Minister of Agriculture, Mr Patrick Taggart, a Deputy Director who received the letter, sympathised with the association.

Speaking on behalf of the Ministry, Taggart said "We feel very shocked at the news of the loss of your staff members due to the activities of the pirates. We can imagine the ripple effects of this. We feel really sorry about it, and I hope that a permanent solution will come in the shortest time."

To drive home their point, the workers, joined by the executive members of the NTOA sailed in a convoy of about 15 trawlers across the Lagos lagoon to the naval base at Apapa. Several Naval officers on board about three large warships stationed at the base, rose to their feet in amazement as the trawlers approached their warships from all angles. When the leading trawler moved close to one of the warships, a naval officer also moved close to it, to listen to Onyema - Orakwusi, who quickly made a request for a meeting with a senior, relevant naval officer. But she was politely told that such a request must first be channelled through the Navy high command. Disappointed, the convoy made a U-turn and sailed back to their bases.

Efforts to speak to Rear Admiral Raji, the Flag Officer commanding the Eastern Naval Command also proved abortive.