

The reign of pirates

The war waged by the anti-piracy forces on Nigeria's territorial waters seems to be yielding fruit, with the recent breakthrough over an organised syndicate arrested in Ondo State. Tunde Busari reports

ON the land they appear as harmless as they are innocent. Though these young Nigerians control a big pocket, which they exuberantly empty on wine and women of easy virtues at night clubs and joints, they put up unassuming look that portrays them only as fun-lovers.

However, their lives while on water share a close affinity with that of a shark, a ruthless carnivorous fish which feed, fat on other fishes for its survival in the aquatic world.

While these groups are not, in the real sense, living in the water, they are making a living on water by hijacking Nigeria-bound vessels loaded with fuel, and killing the crew according to their mood defined by the reaction of their victims to their onslaught.

They use an EJE NAVI vessel to hijack after which they move to a hired vessel named MT GRACE into which they siphon the fuel. The process then proceeds to the transferring of the fuel into the three storage facilities two of which are allegedly owned by a former minister and a traditional ruler.

This operation is carried out some nautical miles offshore where they are sure of maximum security guaranteed by the state-of-the-art weapons in their arsenal.

It was gathered that it is from the storage sites that oil marketers load their fuel tankers for onward distribution to filling stations across the country.

The syndicate operates from an inconspicuous hideout located in the riverine community of Igbo-koda in Ondo State where nationals from Benin Republic, Togo, Ghana and Cameroun are trained on the art of hijacking vessels on the high sea.

The camp uncovered by a combined team of Nigeria Navy, Army, Nigeria Maritime Administration and Safety Agency (NIMASA) and Global West Vessel Specialists Limited (GWVSL) is strategically located in the jungle with a view to shielding the syndicate from suspicion from whichever quarters. This explains why the preponderance of the people of the serene Igbo-koda community is oblivious of the existence of the strangers on their land.

A discreet world

"That is why locating the hide-out posed some challenges which only our determination confronted and broke. The syndicate lived in a world of their own with the camp supplied with all necessary items to make them comfortable," a source disclosed.

Among other facilities in the camp, another source said, include a shooting range and martial art ground. Members are also taken through swimming training taking the advantage of the Atlantic Ocean while a weapon manufacturing factory is also cited there. Three flying boats are also available in the camp.

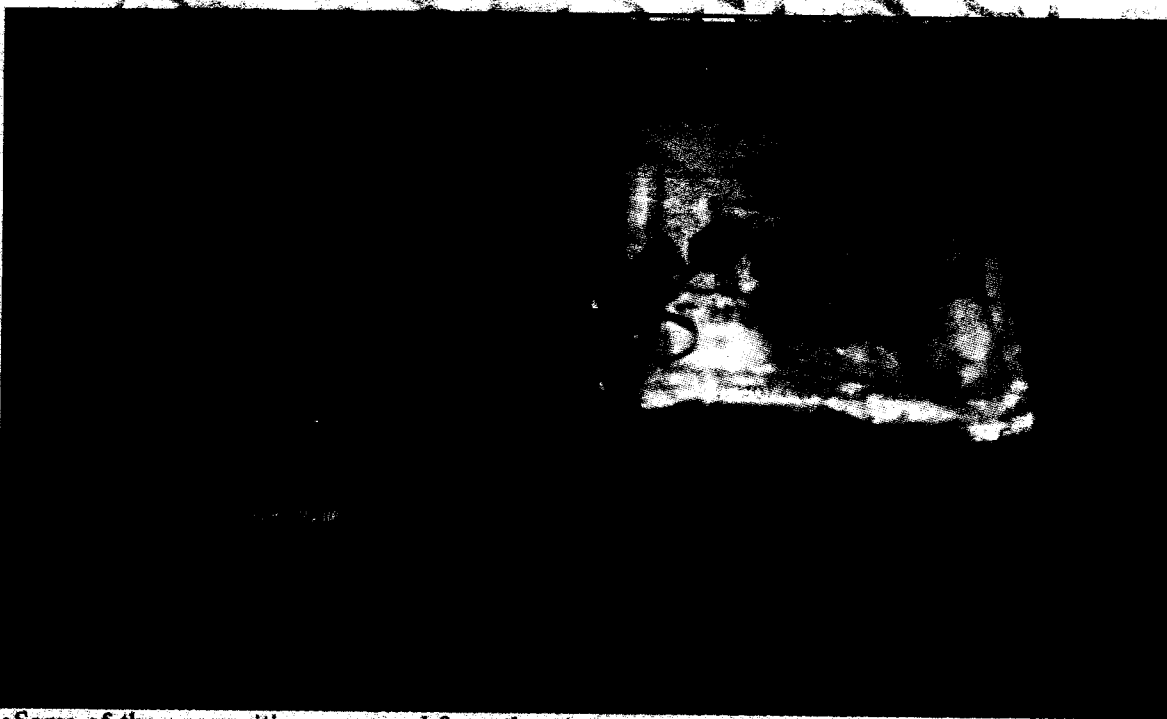
As an organised gang with specific area of specialisation, the syndicate, it was further learnt, enjoys regular patronage of oil cabals with pronounced influence on the policy makers.

The cabals engage the services of the syndicate who also exploit their contact in maritime industry to know when to strike. It is alleged that their operations are determined by insider information, revealing movement of vessels carrying fuel into the country.

"Their informants regularly feed them with information needed to guide their movement. These informants have been responsible for the low success recorded in the past. The syndicate must have got wind of counteractive action plan even before we set out. This is the



• Suspected pirates in detention



• Some of the ammunition recovered from the pirates

kind of frustration we have faced in the past but we are progressing now with the breakthrough," a source also disclosed.

However, the exploit was not achieved on a platter of gold. It went with some sweat even though the result eventually justified the effort. The syndicate initially proved impregnable with a fierce counter-offensive led by the leader of the syndicate known as Wazobia.

The hostility was said to have lasted about 35 minutes after which Wazobia capitulated and consequently led his captors to another camp where about 13 members of the syndicate were also rounded up.

They were pleading for mercy, having realised the futility in fur-

ther dissipating energy on any prank against the team that had wholly occupied the entire 'territory'.

"It was an interesting encounter to put it that way. The leader of the syndicate knew quite well that we were there for a serious business. He knew his time was up but pretended to be what he is not. You know those people will still want to take some risk.

"By the time we overran him, he became something else. It is a breakthrough that will definitely impact in the activities of these criminals on the high sea where illegal activities that sabotage the nation's economy take place with impunity and also denting the image of the country in international

community," a source disclosed.

At the time of the raid, it was learnt that the syndicate was on a standby for another attack on a vessel on the high sea. An operational map recovered from them revealed this.

Other items recovered in the camp comprise 16 sophisticated weapons, including explosive devices, long range high calibre weapons, 10, 000 ammunition of various types; among other dangerous items. Three flying boats were later recovered at bay. They are now in the custody of the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC).

A powerful clique

The leader of the syndicate was said to have not only confessed

about how his syndicate had successfully hijacked about 20 fully loaded vessels in the last 10 months. He also made what a source called a stunning revelation.

He bluntly mentioned some oil cabals, top government officials, NNPC top shots, top oil marketers, including some traditional rulers as engaging in massive economic sabotage behind the scenes.

A particular traditional ruler is regularly mentioned as not only a sponsor, his son is also alleged to be the supplier of arms and also directly engaged in the sales of the stolen oil to marketers.

Three weeks ago the storage facilities of Integrated Oil and Gas Ltd. located in Apapa, Lagos, and owned by a former minister Emmanuel Iheanacho had been identified and locked by the security agents after some of staff were arrested. However, the former minister was released a few days after, while security agents are currently mounting surveillance on the others.

The prime suspect, according to a source, added that his syndicate had killed about 24 innocent persons including three foreigners and security operatives. He also stated that the last operation in which he hijacked a vessel occurred in August when he his gang killed a foreigner on board and also carted away undisclosed amount of foreign currencies.

Before filing the report, the suspects were still undergoing series of interrogation details of which are being kept secret. There, however, is an indication that they would help the security operatives to dig more on the right measure to finally combat security risk they have constituted on Nigeria's territorial waters.

But the security agents are managing the information with utmost discretion not to jeopardise their plan.

"This is not a regular crime and I think it is appropriate not to be carried away with this breakthrough. This is because of the fact that we have a long way to go. When you fight crime, experience has shown that, crime also has a way of fighting back. But I can say that with this arrest we are on course," the source said.

The strong determination so far shown by the security agencies have unsettled the alleged sponsors of the syndicate. Sources revealed a high-level pressure already being mounted on them to manipulate investigation and save the faces of the alleged sponsors.

To achieve this as it was allegedly in practice in the past, N1 billion is said to have been dangled at the security agencies, but the offer that has been rejected.

Given this reason, the authorities have since moved the suspects to one of the Brigade Commands in the North to keep them away from the lobbyists. Security agents have also mounted surveillance on those names the suspects mentioned as accomplice in the crime.

Notable among these people is the Managing Director of an oil company whose office is based in Lagos. It was learnt that the man of Yoruba extraction has on many occasions facilitated the movement of the stolen fuel from vessel to the storage sites.

A report claimed that the man had to jump over a fence when security agents visited him. Also the son of the indicted monarch is said to have escaped to Benin Republic.

According to a report from the International Maritime Bureau (IMB) on Global Piracy released in July, 32 piracy incidents were recorded off the coasts of Benin, Nigeria and Togo in the first half of

• Continued on Page 57