

Pirates Kidnap Two US Sailors off Nigeria's Coast

● *Two soldiers killed, one missing after attack on military patrol team*

Segun James

in Yenagoa with agency report

Pirates attacked an oil supply vessel off the Nigerian coast and kidnapped the captain and chief engineer, both US citizens, an American defence official and security source said yesterday.

Pirate attacks off Nigeria's coast have jumped by a third this year as ships passing through West Africa's Gulf of Guinea, a major commodities route, have come under threat from gangs wanting to snatch cargoes and crew.

According to Reuters, the US-flagged, C-Retrieve, a 222-foot (67 metre) vessel owned by a US marine transport group Edison Chouest Offshore, was attacked early Wednesday, UK-based security firm AKE and two security sources said. The company was not immediately available for comment.

A US defence official said the State Department and Federal Bureau for Investigation (FBI) were leading the American response to the incident.

A second defence official said the US Marine Corps has a small training unit in the region but it was not clear if it would get involved.

US Navy officials have grown increasingly concerned about piracy and armed robbery

in the Gulf of Guinea and are working with local authorities there to strengthen their ability to patrol the region and better share information.

Navy Secretary Ray Mabus called the region a potential "hot spot" after a visit to four countries surrounding the gulf in August.

He told *Defence News* in September the Navy was working closely with Gabon, Senegal, Sao Tome and Ghana to help fight an increase in illegal trafficking of drugs, people and arms.

"The piracy threat is spreading even further through the waters of West Africa, and the attacks have been mounting, even as global rates of reported piracy are at their lowest since 2006," said Michael Frodl of US-based consultancy C-Level Maritime Risks.

Unlike the dangerous waters off Somalia and the Horn of Africa on the east coast of Africa, through which ships now speed with armed guards on board, many vessels have to anchor to do business off West African countries, with little protection.

This makes them a target for criminals and increases insurance costs. Kidnapped sailors and oil workers taken in Nigerian waters are usually released after a ransom is paid.

In a separate incident, two Nigerian soldiers were killed, while another was declared

missing on Tuesday when pirates attacked a vessel carrying construction workers in the creeks in Rivers State, the army said yesterday.

The unsuspecting patrol team was attacked in the creeks of Ikuru community in Adonis Local Government Area of the state.

The patrol team was said to be on guard duty aboard a vessel belonging to Z-Cube Construction Company when the pirates struck. The soldiers were from the Joint Task Force (JTF), Operation Pulo Shield, based in Yenagoa, Bayelsa State.

After the attack, one soldier was found missing while the boat pilot and three staff members of the company sustained varying degrees of gun shot injuries. There was no word on the casualties on the side of the pirates. The incident happened at about noon.

The soldiers were officially deployed to escort the boat and were on their way to the project site belonging to the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC).

Confirming the incident, the media coordinator of the JTF, Lt. Col. Onyema Nwachukwu, said the soldiers fought gallantly to repel the attack and successfully saved the lives of the people they were deployed to protect with their own lives.

The military spokesman said the team ran into an ambush which led to a gun battle that lasted almost one hour.

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