Global Piracy at Five-Year Low


Pirate attacks fell in 2012 to the fewest in five years due to effective antipiracy efforts, a trend offset in part by a rise in cy in West Africa's Gulf of Guinea that threatens an important trade route for crude oil and cocoa to the U.S. and Europe.

Pirates boarded 174 ships around the world last year, compared with 439 in 2011, the International Maritime Bureau said in a report today. The number of people taken hostage dropped to 585 from 802 last year, it said.

East and West Africa were worst-hit with 150 attacks, according to the IMB, a nongovernmental body that tracks trends in maritime crime.

Piracy off Nigeria's coast, in the Gulf of Guinea, could disrupt oil and cocoa supplies, potentially driving up prices. "Nigeria makes up a vast share of global cocoa production," said Keith Flury, senior soft commodities analyst at Rabobank. "Any threats to supplies in the West African region will impact the global cocoa price,"

Pirates attacked 27 vessels off Nigeria in 2012, the IMB said. Four were hijacked, 13 boarded and 8 fired on, the organization said. Just 10 offshore Nigerian attacks were reported in 2011.

Nigeria is West Africa's fourth-largest cocoa producer. Concerns over supplies of the chocolate ingredient already weigh on the market, with the region's crop under pressure from hot, dry
Saharan winds. The country is Africa's largest exporter of light sweet crude oil and produces over two million barrels a day. More attacks increase shipowners' insurance premiums on vessels passing through the gulf. The European Union imports 13% of its oil and 6% of its gas from the region, the European Union Naval Force, known as EU NAVFOR, said.

The EU launched its EU NAVFOR operation in 2008 to combat Somali-based piracy off the Horn of Africa and in the western Indian Ocean. Only 75 ships came under attack off Somalia and in the Gulf of Aden last year, according to the IMB, an about 66% decrease from 2011.

The shipping industry remains concerned for seafarers' safety, said Bill Box, senior external relations manager at the International Association of Independent Tanker Owners.

"In West Africa, the pirate attacks tend to be a lot more violent than those that occur in the Gulf of Aden," Mr. Box said. "The ships in the (West African) region are usually attacked in a more aggressive way, whereby the crew are usually imprisoned, and have much greater intensity than attacks elsewhere."

The EU said last week it will boost maritime security around the Gulf of Guinea by contributing €4.5 million ($6 million) to train coastguards and make it easier for countries and agencies to share information. The project starts this month and includes São Tomé and Príncipe, Benin, Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Nigeria, and Togo.