

STRUCTURE AND TYPES OF PIRACY IN THE NIGER DELTA REGION, 1995-2019

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Abstract

The study gathers that the concept of piracy has over the years been fraught with diverse definitions and scope, leading to an ambiguous approach in studying the concept. The study therefore makes an effort to assess the various types of piracy in the Niger Delta region, their structure, weapons used and the implications of such on the security of the Niger Delta region. Divided into three different types- riverine criminality, coastal or low reach pirates and the deep offshore pirates, the study engages primary and secondary data to assess these three types of piracy, the shared links between them through knowledge transfer and the exchange of 'ideas' and overall implications on the Niger Delta region.

Keywords; Piracy, Riverine Criminality, Niger Delta, Deep-offshore Pirates, Coastal Pirates

Introduction

The Gulf of Guinea region holds enormous potentials judging by the volumes of trade conducted by countries across the globe. As interesting as this may appear, the region also leaves in its trail legacies of piracy, militancy, armed robbery and armed criminality. From politically motivated early militant groups, such as MEND, staging attacks against oil and gas infrastructure to modern-day criminal groups taking foreign crewmembers for ransom from international vessels transiting deep off the West African coast, piracy and maritime criminality has proven to be elusive to the many efforts to counter it. Indeed, for the past five years, the focus of piracy activities in the Gulf of Guinea has shifted from pirate groups targeting vessels to steal oil cargo (petro piracy) to current Kidnap for Ransom (K&R) piracy. The Niger Delta region is a critical area of the Gulf of Guinea given the enormous natural resources available in the region. The issue of piracy has persisted in the area owing to a lack of proper governance, environmental degradation, poverty, etc. The pirates have however been known to be of three types, namely riverine criminals, coastal or low reach pirates and the deep sea (offshore pirates). The

different types of pirates have their mode of operation and to a large extent, exchange 'competencies and ideas'. Using mostly primary and also secondary sources of data, the study attempts an analysis of the types of piracy in the Niger Delta, identifying the gap in the UNCLOS definition piracy (any act committed 200nm from a country's coastline) as it relates to the Niger Delta and of course the security implications for the region.

Origin and Causes of Piracy in the Niger Delta

Piracy in Nigerian territorial waters has a long history, dating back to the 1800s. During this time, the area around the Niger Delta was known for being a hub of piracy activity. Pirates would often target European ships that were transporting goods such as palm oil and other valuable resources. In response, the British colonial government in Nigeria made efforts to combat piracy in the region, including the use of naval patrols and the establishment of a marine police force. However, these efforts were cumulatively not effective, as piracy continued to be a problem in Nigerian waters until the mid-20th century. As Nigeria gained independence in 1960, the new government put more effort to combat piracy with the help of the Nigerian Navy and other security agencies in the Nigerian waters.¹ Perhaps achieving the desired results has not been entirely effective given the myriad of causes. Such causes fall within a range of bad and ineffective governance, political exclusion and marginalization, poverty, corruption, environmental pollution, natural resource mismanagement. Thus, due to the failure of the state to fulfil its own part of the social contract, there appears to be a high level of frustration and a resort to aggression by individuals in the region.

Types of Piracy in the Niger Delta

It should be understood that piracy in the Niger Delta presents itself in different forms. A proper understanding of these various forms can in no small measure direct the counter piracy operations by the security agencies. For all purposes and intent of this work, piracy has been analyzed and broken down into three types;

- a. riverine criminals
- b. coastal or low reach pirates
- c. Deep sea (offshore) pirates

Riverine Criminals

Whether or not this group falls under the UNCLOS definition, the

fact remains that they are a key security threat in their various communities of operations. It may also be safe to state that there is the likelihood for these local group of 'pirates' to gain expertise, share knowledge and alliance with deep offshore pirates and further create harm on the high sea.

Coastal and Low-Reach Pirates

These group of pirates are known to operate up to 40nm from shore. Given this limited distance, local vessels seem to mostly fall within the radius of their attacks. To ensure a secured escape from security agencies, coastal pirates operate close to their hideouts on land/bases given the operational limitations of their plans and equipment. It follows that their targets are mainly vessels conducting along the coast. Their targets could also be cargo vessels as well as oil and gas support vessels carrying out cabotage duties. They conduct their operations kidnapping individuals for ransom, looting, etc., and seem to also concentrate their assaults mostly on local crew than foreign seafarers.⁵

Deep Offshore Pirates

Deep offshore pirates happen to be on top of the food chain when piracy is concerned. First they have formidable equipment, have a viable network and can accessed the wider 'largesse' from the Ocean spread.

Put simply, they are formidable enough to operate far from the coast of West Africa and to make contact with the heavy traffic on the international waters. A deeper assessment of this group of pirates indicate that they have evolved sophistication and expertise as marked by their ability to increase the number of hostages per attack. These groups under the deep offshore pirates have extended their influence further into the wider Gulf of Guinea as opposed to their previous frequency in the Nigerian waters. According to the UNDOC report on piracy, the number of deep offshore pirate groups is estimated to be between four and six.⁶ Although this number has been contested by oral sources on the field as they are deemed to be more, what seems to be agreeable is the growing influence of the deep water pirates over the years covered in the study.

Levels of Pirate Group Structures

For a crime such as piracy to be effective, it has to be structured in a manner to create results for the perpetrators. Members are patterned into groups for a smooth flow of communication and orders from the strategic leaders to ground operators. It may be safe to assert that such groups mirror the arrangement of a system or organization with various levels of

leadership. This study attempts a study of four groups of the piracy structure namely;

- a. High Level Facilitators
- b. Leaders and Negotiators
- c. Specialized Function Groups
- d. Foot Soldiers

1. *High Level Facilitators*

a. Sponsors and Investors

According to several sources interviewed, piracy thrives on the financial influence of sponsors and investors for operations. Most of the individuals that constitute this level are business men and women who invest their monies into it for the purpose of getting massive profit from it. They do not get directly involved in the illicit trade but live and operate from land, organizing the needed resources for the success of their operations on the sea. Such sponsorship and investment could come through money for the purchase of guns, speedboats, food and medicine for the hostages, in the case of kidnap for ransom, etc.

b. High Level Ex-militants

Ex-militants' engagement in piracy operations holds a critical place in analyzing the issue of piracy in the Niger Delta. First, some of the militants are quite conversant with the illegal dealings in the area and have engaged in high level criminality for years before the amnesty programme that was brought about in 2009. Sadly, even the amnesty programme did not rid them of the sophisticated arms in their possession and as such they are still highly capable of causing havoc and engaging in illegal dealings.⁷ In addition to this is the finance still in the position of these militants who can also employ same as a means of investment into piracy operations for returns. Another source indicated from another angle that some ex-militants are so powerful that they control specific areas in the creeks and as such must receive a sort of payment before granting access to the pirates to operate in that area.⁸ Again, the cooperation of ex-militants, especially those that may still be engaged in illegal bunkering on land is highly need. It is usually expected that if an illegal bunkering operation is going on onshore, then the activity of pirates must be suspended in the area in order not to attract attention or invite a crackdown from the military in the course of their operation.⁹ Sources also revealed that ex-militant leaders sometimes took directions from political leaders to hasten the process of hostage negotiation when it interfered the business of illegal oil bunkering.¹⁰ This goes to suggest that militancy or the activities of ex-

militants plays a crucial part in piracy operations. Whether directly or tacitly, militancy and piracy share a nexus.

c. Protectors/High Level Actors

As gathered in the course of this research, deep offshore pirates tend to benefit tremendously from ex-militants who offer them protection. It does not end here as local politicians have been fingered as being part of this support system too. In some cases, some pirate groups are hired for the purpose of thuggery and other armed violence against real and perceived political opponents.¹¹ Such conditions have been known to upscale the confidence level of pirates believing they are untouchable given their connections with individuals in positions of authority.

2. Leaders and Negotiators

a. Onshore Group Leaders

As previously mentioned in parts of this study, piracy is a land based crime conducted at sea. The strategic planning, training, hostage camps, ransom coordination are all conducted on land. The operations at the sea are only but an extension of an organized criminality on land. To have a smooth running of these operations on land, groups leaders are chosen just like any other legitimate organization. These leaders offer thoughts, ideas, connections and extensive planning before the actual operations are being conducted.

Sources interviewed gave varying figures regarding the number of pirates in a group. The figures range between 20 to 60.¹² However, it appears the right range may be between 25 to 50, given the level of coordination required to manage the members of the group. If the number happens to be higher than this, communication could seem difficult and the chances of a leak in information about their operations is high. For this reason, it appears the pirate groups maintain a sizeable number of group members.

The group leaders could be chosen on a number of basis ranging from competence, courage, previous criminality history, intelligence, etc. The leader is most times attached with two assistants who help in coordinating the affairs. The group leaders are mandated with a dual responsibility of developing robust strategy and operations.¹³ They offer directions on attacks occurring on the high sea and also engage in negotiations although they do not directly get involved in the negotiation process. It is also very unlikely to find them sheltering in the creeks or the mangrove. These are often seen as being for the lower members of the

groups. The group members also share the proceeds gotten from operations to the lower group leaders. This is made easier by the coordination of his deputies.

Assistants/Subordinates

The subordinates report directly to the group leaders and are principally in charge of collecting intelligence and reporting same to the group leaders. They are in charge of spying on planned operations from the security agencies and developing plans in response to that. They also coordinate the gathering of intelligence from rival groups, vessels as well as new plans and policies from government.¹⁴ It may be safe to submit that the assistants and deputies play a critical role in the success of piracy operations. It also connotes that the selection process of the deputies and assistants must be a thorough one to ensure secrecy and results in the illicit business.

Negotiators

With the evolution in the piracy business from petro-piracy to kidnap for ransom, the area of negotiation becomes very paramount and critical. It is the image of modern piracy in the Niger Delta, requiring skill, coordination, tact, technology and extensive expertise as touching on the release of hostages. This could further suggest that individuals chosen to coordinate this area must have demonstrated grit, experience, intelligence and to some extent criminal history. To corroborate this position, one interviewee maintained that not everyone is skilled in the negotiation techniques and as such a particular negotiator may carry out negotiations for several pirate groups.¹⁵

Be that as it may, it is imperative to state the emergency system set up as a backup for the hierarchical structure in piracy groups. Such emergency system provides the deputy with powers to appoint another negotiator in the event that the one available is either dubious, fails in their responsibility, etc. An interviewee clearly stated that there have been occasions where the negotiator attempted to manipulate the ransom agreement for personal benefits, without the knowledge of the pirate group. Such acts could be one of the reasons why additional arrangements are often developed by pirate groups.

Specialized Function Groups

For pirate groups to be very effective in the delivery of their missions, a level of sophistication and specialization is required to gain operational results. To achieve this, a careful selection is conducted during the recruitment. The

recruitment of the best brains appears to be quite easy given the number of people who are graduates but are not gainfully employed to cater for their basic needs and their family. It is more of a skill for crime situation, where individuals apply the process of critical thinking acquired through their years of schooling in crime.

The specialized function groups have the attack groups who conduct the actual operation using speedboats on the high sea. They also handle sophisticated weapons and have been known to abuse substance in order to drive their actions. They are equally deadly and have been reported to be very ruthless in their operations. Sources indicate that they are often in possession of special arms such as AK 47, M16s and M4s, often wear black clothes or para military styled clothes (perhaps as a mark of identity or to evade sight of security operatives).¹⁶

The calibre of these arms goes to demonstrate the dangerous nature of these groups. And perhaps more concerning is the organized nature of the bigger groups backed with sufficient finances to acquire more of such weapons.

The specialized function groups are further subdivided into attack team leaders and special function members.

The Attack Team Leaders

Leadership is a key index in the actualization of better operations by organized crimes. Thus, for most pirate groups, leadership exist in several levels. Accordingly, smaller pirate attack team at sea are attached a



Fig 1 - Picture of an AK 47, the most preferred firearm by pirates in operations

Source: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/6/65/AK-47_type_II_noBG.png



Fig 2. Picture of an M16 Rifle sometimes used by pirates in operations

Source: <https://www.britannica.com/technology/M16-rifle>



Fig 3: Picture showing and M4 rifle used by deep offshore Pirates

Source: [www.https://www.istockphoto.com/photos/m4-carbine](https://www.istockphoto.com/photos/m4-carbine)

specific leader. The team usually consists of one or two speedboats, with the number of men numbering between seven to ten. This space is well calculated to allow space on the speedboats for numerous Jerri cans of fuel. It is also needed to hold hostages should an operation be successful. Given the specific nature of operations, attack teams represent a caste of varying functions, backgrounds, crafts and competencies. To lend better credence to this, an interviewee commented thus;

When I was actively involved in piracy, there were a number of instances where we would witness educated pirate groups aboard a vessel. In one instance, one was a trained sailor with proper navigation skills who stood

near the captain giving directions in what to be done. The other was a computer scientist who was referred to as “the manager” who “played a role in ensuring that the correct amount of AGO/oil was transferred.”

Special Function Members

For members of a pirate group to be under the special function members, they must possess a specific skill, useful to the group. Such skillset could include the vessel's pilot or engineer. It is also imperative to note here that the role of the boat pilot is highly useful for the riverine criminal groups given the pilot's extensive knowledge of the rivers and creeks. An interviewee admitted that the pilot's knowledge is so useful that they can even navigate the creeks at night. They are equally skilled at crossing the waves at the river's entry to guard against capsizing of the boat.¹⁸ It is a testament to the level of sophistication needed to drive and sustain piracy operations for the needed results.

Perhaps one of the most critical aspects of piracy operations are the informants. The members of this group are quite important because the sea operations rely on them for success in their missions. Informants could comprise men, women or children with some as young as 10 years. However, sources interviewed revealed that most women who engage in piracy act as informants as men are mostly preferred in the area of combat. This may also not be unconnected with the tendency for women to employ sexual advances to gather sensitive information that may prove useful to their specific pirate group. The work of informants ranges from sending out intelligence about the departure of a ship, its estimated time of arrival, information about rival groups, information about planned security operations, etc.

Additionally, women informants also prove themselves useful in fetching water, going on different errands, keeping watch over the weapons at the camps, preparing food and attracting new recruits into their group.¹⁹ The special group functions also extend to cover individuals responsible for shooting and lifting (those who lift and place the grappling ladder). Account from interviewees as well as from photos, video footage and first-person accounts, two pirates are often responsible for hooking the ladder on the vessel under attack. Four or five pirates usually board the vessel, with three to five members of the team remaining on the speedboat, to alert the boarding team in case of security or Navy vessels responding. Deep Offshore pirates know the general structure of vessels, in particular, the antennas and the tracking and alert systems indicating that some attack