

U.S. Naval officer from Combined Task Force-67 demonstrates operation of Automated Identification System ship tracker to Ghanaian naval officer



U.S. Navy (Jason T. Poplin)

Maritime Security in the Gulf of Guinea

By PATRICK J. PATERSON

Oil tanker passing Port Harcourt, Nigeria, in Gulf of Guinea

AP/Wide World Photo (George Osodi)

Security conditions are deteriorating in one of the most important energy regions in the world. As the United States tries to wean itself from its Middle East oil dependency, areas such as the Gulf of Guinea off the West African coast are emerging as potentially the most important regions on the globe for access to this diminishing resource. The United States has recently declared the Gulf of Guinea an area of strategic national interest and thereby one that could require military intervention to protect its resources. However, it is an area rife with conflict. In fact, the challenges of operating there may prove to be dangerous for the U.S. military.

The Gulf of Guinea region encompasses a dozen African nations. From the north, Ghana borders the tumultuous nations of Côte d'Ivoire, Liberia, and Sierra Leone. Civil wars and ethnic strife in these nations have killed approximately 300,000 in the past 10 years. Continuing south, the region passes through small Togo and Benin, then through the regional hegemon Nigeria, and into Cameroon and Equatorial Guinea. The Congo and the Democratic Republic of the Congo

(DROC) lie just above the southernmost Gulf of Guinea nation, Angola.

These nations are notoriously unstable. United Nations Humanitarian Relief Director Jan Egeland called the recent conflict in DROC "the world's worst humanitarian crisis."¹ Angola was famous as the scene of Africa's longest conflict, a 27-year civil war that lasted until 2002 and left 500,000 dead. Sao Tome and Principe, a small island nation 200 miles from the coast, sits geographically isolated from the other Gulf of Guinea nations.

The number of waterways along the gulf is enormous. The coastline stretches 1,900 miles from Ghana to Angola, the equivalent of the distance from Nova Scotia to the Straits of Florida. Additionally, there are numerous river systems such as the Niger, Congo, and Ogooue that provide conveyance for much of the area's commerce. By itself, the Niger Delta, the lowland area where the Niger and Benue Rivers spill into the Gulf of Guinea, is estimated to have 2,000 miles of navigable waterways. The Congo River pours 1.4 million cubic feet of water per second into the Atlantic, second only to the Amazon River in volume. Its final 220 miles spill out of the Congo Basin, a plateau 1,000 feet above sea level in the interior; the drop and volume of water are

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U.S. Navy (Eric Brown)

Director of Strategy and Policy, U.S. Naval Forces Europe, addressing Gulf of Guinea Maritime and Security Conference

Nigeria is the largest U.S. trade partner on the continent, supplying 10 percent of America's imported oil

so significant that these final 220 miles carry more hydroelectric potential than all the rivers and lakes in the United States combined.²

The New Persian Gulf?

The energy potential for the Gulf of Guinea region is astonishing. Experts predict that by 2020, oil production there will surpass the total production of the Persian Gulf nations: 25 percent of the global production as compared to 22 percent from the Persian Gulf. Not surprisingly, multinational companies recognized this potential 10 years ago. In the late 1990s, oil conglomerates such as Royal Dutch Shell started expanding their operations in the area. By 2000, nearly \$50 billion had been invested in oil infrastructure, and an estimated 40,000 personnel were employed by Western oil companies on rigs and refineries.³ The geopolitical repercussions of this discovery are just beginning to be felt; heavy development is expected to continue, especially in light of the export challenges in Iraq, Iran, and Venezuela. Additionally, China's and India's economies continue to grow in leaps and bounds, demanding reliable energy sources to feed their industrial machines. In January 2006, China purchased a \$2.3 billion share of a Nigerian oil field, its largest investment on the continent to date.

Nigeria is the linchpin in the whole Gulf of Guinea region. An economic giant compared to its neighbors, its economy is second only to South Africa in all of sub-Saharan Africa. A regional hegemon militarily and economically, Nigeria is also the largest oil producer in Africa. Ninety-five percent of its economy is generated from oil revenue. Nigeria is the largest U.S. trade partner on the continent, supplying 10 percent of America's imported oil. That

places it fifth among U.S. oil providers behind Canada, Saudi Arabia, Mexico, and Venezuela. Nearly half of Nigeria's oil production goes to the United States. Nigeria is the world's eighth largest oil exporter.⁴

Nigeria has many problems, however. Corruption is endemic and institutionalized. From its independence from Britain in 1960 until its first democratic elections in 1998, it was ruled nearly continuously by military autocrats. During this time, the country's leaders, including strongman General Sani Abacha who remained in power from 1993 until 1998, stole an estimated \$400 billion of the country's funds and secreted it away in overseas accounts.⁵ Despite its enormous oil wealth, Nigeria has one of the lowest gross domestic products per capita in the area, just above Angola among the Gulf of Guinea nations, and one of the worst income distributions in the world: 80 percent of the generated oil revenue wealth accrues to only 1 percent of the population.⁶ Transparency International ranks Nigeria as one of the five most corrupt countries in the world, and the Economist Intelligence Unit listed the country's quality of life index as the fourth worst.

The corruption extends from the highest to the lowest points of Nigeria's government. The president of the senate was forced to resign after taking bribes to pass an inflated budget. The inspector general of the police force was found guilty of stealing \$140 million. He was sentenced to only 6 months in jail. Two admirals were found guilty of stealing and selling oil in the delta and were relieved of their duties.⁷ In the state of Bayelsa, which produces 30 percent of the country's oil, the governor has spent \$25 million since 2002 on his state mansion, including \$8.5 million for two new houses and nearly \$6 million on the fence surrounding the buildings.⁸

Much of the corruption stems from a criminal practice known as "oil bunkering." Illicit or stolen barges pull up alongside an oil pipeline in an isolated location (often under cover of darkness), "hot tap" into the pipeline by drilling into it and installing a valve, then make off with thousands of barrels that can be sold on the black market. This reckless practice is as dangerous as it is illegal. Within the last few months, 500 people have died in separate incidents as the siphoned oil

accidentally ignited, burning most victims beyond recognition.

An estimated \$3 billion in oil is stolen each year from oil companies. Regional strongmen and local politicians permit this behavior in return for kickbacks and protection money from the thieves.⁹ The stolen funds also provide a source of arms for gangs that operate in the delta.

The inhabitants of the Niger River Delta are fed up with the corruption and complicity. In early 2006, Ijaw tribe members there kidnapped four American citizens and numerous other Western oil company employees, held them for ransom, and called for better distribution of wealth and the liberation of the delta from its tyrannical rulers. The hostages were released after 19 days. One month later, nine foreign contractors working for Willbros Group of Houston—including three Americans and one British citizen—were also kidnapped and held for ransom. Three of them were held for nearly 5 weeks before their release was negotiated. Although secrecy shrouds the case, many believe that the ransom demands were paid by oil companies. In more recent violence, on May 10, 2006, American oil executive Rick Wiginton was murdered while driving through Lagos by an assailant who approached his vehicle on a motorcycle. American hostage Macon Hawkins testified to the determination of the insurgents on his release: "These people are serious, very serious about what they are doing. They are going to fight and they are going to fight to the death."¹⁰

One insurgent group, the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta, has demanded \$1.5 billion in cash, the release of two of their jailed leaders, and a presidential promise to address their needs. Armed with rocket-propelled grenade launchers and automatic weapons, the militants have frequently attacked oil company platforms and barges from speedboats along the numerous waterways. Having recently resorted to car bomb attacks, the groups have also threatened to attack international oil tankers operating along West African coastal waters.¹¹ They have vowed to continue the attacks until they have interrupted the country's daily oil production by 1 million barrels (20 percent of Nigeria's current 2.5 million barrels per day) or until their demands are met. The militants exceeded their own expectations. As a result of the violence, Royal Dutch Shell shut down production at terminals and oil fields in 2006,

thereby closing the spigot on 25 percent of the country's daily oil exports.¹² Later that year, Royal Dutch Shell and other oil companies evacuated their employees and families from the region, citing increased violence.

The crippling of the Nigerian oil industry could have disastrous results. Energy experts estimate that if Nigerian exports were completely taken offline, the price of a barrel of oil could skyrocket much higher than during the 2006 crisis when prices hit \$75. Without the world's eighth largest producer—coupled with additional fears about access to oil supplies in Venezuela and the Middle East—prices could quickly reach \$110 per barrel and over \$4.00 per gallon at U.S. service stations. The National Intelligence Council, in a study of Africa's problems, has declared the collapse of Nigeria to be “the most important risk facing the continent today.”¹³

In many ways, Nigeria is a microcosm of the rest of the Gulf of Guinea and even the African continent itself. Replete with abundant resources, its productivity is hindered by corrupt officials, regional warlords who put tribal loyalties above national ones, and the escalating violence between religious sects. Foreign investment is driven off by fear of the lawlessness and instability of the nation. Muslim fundamentalists in the north have grown weary of the lack of governance, and 12 states have recently adopted sharia law. Both HIV and AIDS are rampant throughout the

land, and the Nigerian military forces, frequent participants in peacekeeping operations in other African nations, have been depleted by the diseases.¹⁴

Nigeria's population of 133 million is the largest in Africa, more than all the other gulf nations combined; 1 of every 6 Africans lives there. However, the country is polarized, often violently, between the Muslim north and Christian/Animist south. The Muslims count some 65 million (2½ million more than Iraq), making Nigeria the largest Muslim population on the continent. An estimated 10,000 have died in sectarian violence since 1999,¹⁵ and the recent uproar over the prophet Mohammed cartoons has caused more deaths in Nigeria than any other country in the world.¹⁶

The violence could get worse before it gets better. President Olusegun Obasanjo, a Christian from the south—legally restricted from running for a third term—has lobbied for a constitutional amendment that would permit him to remain in office. That would lead to countrywide instability promoted by his political opponents and could provoke open rebellion. According to some U.S. officials, the worst-case scenario for America would be the emergence

of a northern Muslim general or politician into the presidency, either democratically or through unconstitutional means. The United States could then find itself facing a Muslim population—nearly three times that

of Iraq—in control of vast energy resources. Such a situation could result in U.S. military intervention on a much larger scale than in Iraq.¹⁷

Energy security is not the only problem in the Gulf of Guinea. Fisheries protection, drug smuggling, harbor security, and piracy undermine other commercial interests and scare away foreign investment. The International Maritime Bureau lists the gulf as the second most violent coastline in the world (behind the Somali coastline). Twenty-one acts of piracy were reported there in 2005.¹⁸ Countless others go unreported. Illegal fishing robs an estimated \$350 million in revenue from the Gulf of Guinea nations each year.¹⁹

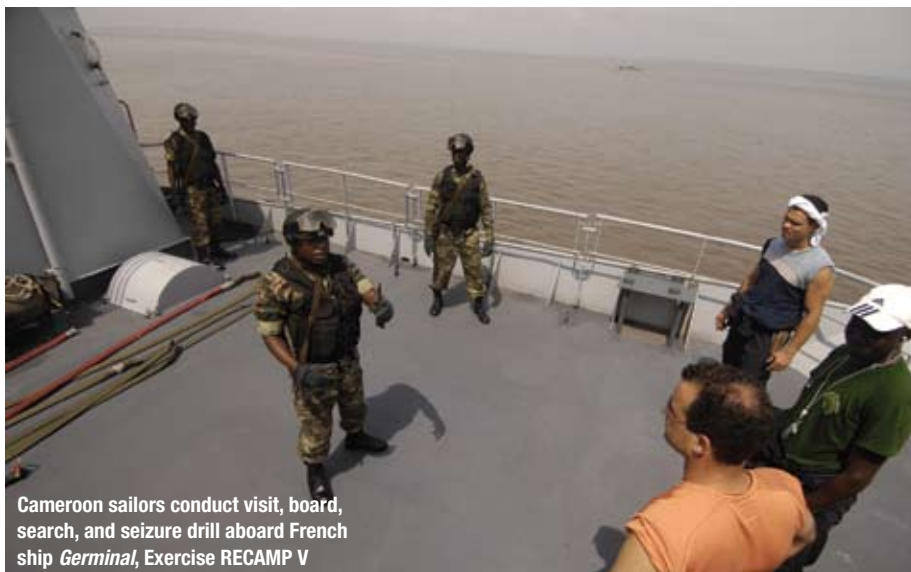
U.S. Efforts in the Region

The Gulf of Guinea coastline has also become the layover point favored by narcotics smugglers trying to reach the lucrative markets of Europe. In September 2004, a French warship intercepted a Togolese tugboat, *Pitea*, off the coast of Ghana with more than 2 tons of cocaine worth \$50 million.²⁰ In 2004, Spanish officials seized more than 20 tons of cocaine that had originated in the Gulf of Guinea. Nigerians are the most frequently arrested drug smugglers in Austria (more than double any other nationality) and the second most frequently arrested in Spain.²¹

Protecting maritime commerce and the sealanes is becoming a critical effort of the U.S. Navy, particularly those forces serving under U.S. European Command (USEUCOM), headquartered in Stuttgart, Germany. USEUCOM has responsibility for all American forces operating in Europe, Africa, and parts of Central Asia. General Charles Wald, USAF, the former 4-star Deputy Commander of USEUCOM, noted the importance of the waterways in and around the Gulf of Guinea: “Our single greatest challenge is the cooperation and willingness of African coastal nations to see maritime security as a regional problem and to act on known security issues.”²²

USEUCOM's maritime strategy is based on higher guidance provided in the White House's National Maritime Security Strategy, which recognizes the need to protect the oceans and international maritime commerce, the latter of which provides conveyance for 80 percent of the world's exports. According to this strategy, “The United States, in cooperation with its allies, will lead an international effort to improve monitoring and enforce-

the National Intelligence Council has declared the collapse of Nigeria to be “the most important risk facing the continent today”



Cameroon sailors conduct visit, board, search, and seizure drill aboard French ship *Germinal*, Exercise RECAMP V

14 Combat Camera Squadron (Jason T. Bailey)

ment capabilities through enhanced cooperation at the bilateral, regional, and global level.”²³ The national guidance clearly applies to USEUCOM’s efforts in the Gulf of Guinea.

These sentiments were further emphasized in 2004 when Acting Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Charles Snyder reported, “Improving African capacities to monitor their coastlines is . . . a critical part of our strategy. We . . . will revive the old African coastal security program, which helps African security forces protect their shores as well as their marine resources.”²⁴ This African Coastal Security program was initiated by the Office of the Secretary of Defense for Policy, International Security Affairs Division, in 1985. Although the program provided necessary equipment, training, and technical advice, it was inadequately funded with only \$3 million per year. The program was discontinued in 1995.

Maritime domain awareness (MDA) is the centerpiece of the U.S. Navy’s strategy in the Gulf of Guinea. MDA is a broad term that refers to the situational awareness of anything in a nation’s waters or territorial or economic exclusion zone, and anything that could affect the nation’s security, safety, economics, or environment. For instance, MDA includes surveillance networks and coastal radars that could help the Gulf of Guinea nations selectively react to illegal activities in their waters. One such MDA system is the Automatic Identification System (AIS), a commercial shipboard broadcast system that functions much like the Identification Friend or Foe equipment carried by military and commercial aircraft. AIS is capable of transmitting 4,500 data reports per minute and updating every 2 seconds. The cost of an AIS unit, about \$4,000 for the network, would be quickly redeemed from the illegal activity it could prevent. The system could enable African coastal naval forces to sort legitimate maritime commerce from the illicit contacts (those not “squawking” a signal), thereby improving MDA and reducing illegal trafficking and piracy. Admiral Harry Ulrich III, commander of Naval Forces Europe, explains, “We do it every day with airplanes and it’s time for us to start thinking about doing the same thing with ships at sea.”²⁵

Another useful surveillance tool is the Regional Maritime Awareness Capability (RMAC), which would enable a nascent African navy to monitor its coastal waters and sortie its forces to interdict illegal activi-

U.S. Marine Corps (Donald E. Preston)



Commander, Coalition Landing Forces Western Africa Training Cruise, meets with Guinean armed forces at Benti Training Area

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ties. Composed of an array of coastal radar systems, this system would allow African coastal nations to detect and track vessels out to 25 nautical miles from the sensor in all weather conditions. Coupled with a naval reaction force, RMAC could impede smuggling, piracy, or illegal fishing in the host nation’s waters.

Establishing cooperative partnerships with African navies is a critical element of the U.S. strategy. The 1,000-ship Navy concept, a phrase first coined by the U.S. Navy’s Vice Admiral John Morgan and Rear Admiral Charles Martoglio in 2005, is an essential strategy to enlist the assistance of host-nation forces and relieve pressure on a U.S. military over-extended in Iraq and Afghanistan. The development of partner navies in the Gulf of Guinea would enable countries to combat the myriad maritime challenges on the high seas and in the littorals: piracy, smuggling, narcotics trafficking, oil bunkering, and fisheries violations.²⁶

The concept ideally suits the asset-limited Naval Forces Europe, the naval component of U.S. European Command. Said a strategic planner at its headquarters:

We don’t have the resources to provide maritime security here. We’re not going to

*be a force in the Gulf of Guinea. But we are looking to increase our involvement right now—not to send ships on patrol but to develop partnerships and develop capacities. If the Navy had more assets, would they send them here? Probably. But our first choice is to use what we have to facilitate training and regional cooperation.*²⁷

European partners such as the French and British have a long history of investment and involvement in the region and could contribute to maritime security efforts.

Annual exercises such as the West African Training Cruise encourage just that kind of naval cooperation. The cruise, conducted regularly since 1978,

consists of a series of bilateral interactions between the U.S. Navy and individual African nations. The 2005 deployment saw the USS *Gunston Hall* and the USS *Swift* conduct exercises with navies along the West African and Gulf of Guinea coasts. The training included small boat drills, riverine operations, live-fire exercises, and amphibious raids.

Other Navy ship visits could also help to improve the U.S. reputation among Gulf of Guinea nations. For example, the April 2006 visit of USS *Emory S. Land* to Ghana, Sao Tome and Principe, Gabon, Congo, and

maritime domain awareness is the centerpiece of the U.S. Navy’s strategy in the Gulf of Guinea



Militants in Niger Delta area release kidnapped U.S. oil worker

AP/Wide World Photo (George Osodi)

Angola helped maintain navy-to-navy relations by conducting exercises in leadership development, natural disaster response, medical awareness, and disease prevention. The ship's Sailors refurbished a high school in Sao Tome, a gesture of goodwill that will advance U.S. interests in this island nation.²⁸

The Navy's new Riverine Command is aptly suited to deal with problems in areas such as the Gulf of Guinea. Commissioned in Little Creek, Virginia, in January 2006, Riverine Group One (RG-1) will provide a strategic element that has not been used by conventional Navy forces since the Vietnam era. Developed to patrol rivers and coasts, conduct interdiction operations, and engage enemy naval forces, RG-1 tools include high speed (40 knots plus), shallow draft, and lightly armored boats capable of operating day or night. Although RG-1's assets will not be trained, equipped, and available for deployment for some time, its contribution to a post-Cold War world of regional conflicts will be critical.

U.S. efforts to fix the problems in the Gulf of Guinea will also require an inter-agency approach. The Department of Defense is not equipped to stamp out corruption, teach AIDS/HIV prevention, or provide malaria medicines. These are tasks better suited for elements such as the World Health Organization, U.S. Department of State, or U.S. Agency for International Development. Regardless, American efforts in the region may be viewed with suspicion.

Likewise, the Gulf of Guinea regional partners must cooperate and collaborate in

their efforts to improve maritime security along their coast. Agreements must be developed to permit intelligence-sharing, allow

the Department of Defense is not equipped to stamp out corruption, teach AIDS/HIV prevention, or provide malaria medicines

the pursuit of criminals into neighboring waters, and use regional facilities to train partner navies using U.S. and participating European navies.

The channel ahead of the U.S. Navy and its allies in the Gulf of Guinea is narrow and fraught with dangerous cross currents. The investment of effort in the region will be a lengthy and difficult endeavor. However, senior military officials are cautiously optimistic. General James Jones, USMC, former commander of U.S. European Command, stated, "The most recent phenomenon is that the United States now is paying more attention to problems surrounding Africa. And we believe that proactive investment is always cheaper than reactive investment."²⁹

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