

Together against Pirates

Sea piracy and armed sea robbery are major constraints to capture fisheries in the waters of Nigeria

Nigeria lies between latitudes 4°16'–13°52' N and longitudes 2° 96'–14° 37' E. It is bordered by the Republic of Benin to the west, Niger to the north, Cameroon to the east and the Atlantic Ocean to the south. It has a coastline of 853 km. In 1978, Nigeria declared its 200-nautical-miles exclusive economic zone (EEZ), which covers an area of 210,900 sq km over which it has sovereign rights for the purpose of exploiting, conserving and managing its fisheries resources. Nigeria is also endowed

and social well-being of the nation as well as to the maintenance of the livelihoods of fishermen and future generations.

The fisheries within the Nigerian territorial waters and its EEZ can be broadly classified as follows :

(a) brackishwater or estuarine small-scale artisanal canoe fishery in lagoons, creeks and estuaries;

(b) coastal artisanal canoe fishery within the five-nautical-mile non-trawling zone, mainly with gillnets, which targets pelagic species as well as sharks and sail fishes in deeper waters; and

(c) industrial coastal inshore fishery, made up mainly of trawlers targeting demersal fish and shrimps usually up to 50 m depth. Deep-water fisheries resources with high economic potential, including tuna and drifffish (*Arioma*) species, have remained largely unexploited by the local fleet.

The population of fishermen in Nigeria has been estimated at about 1.2 mn; there are about 6 mn employed in the sector, including processors, marketers and other ancillary workers.

Landing sites

Many coastal towns, villages, communities or settlements adjacent to the Atlantic Ocean provide natural landing beaches/sites (on the waterfronts), scattered along the entire coastline, which are used by small-scale artisanal fishermen, who have consistently contributed between 81.4 and 89.6 per cent of the 0.6 mn tonnes of annual fish production.

The Nigerian Trawler Owners Association (NITOA), an umbrella organization of all the fishing

with a large number of brackishwater bodies, including estuaries, creeks and lagoons.

Fishing has been a major source of very rich animal protein/nutrients, direct and indirect employment and wealth creation as well as immense economic benefits to Nigeria. Fish forms a key ingredient in global menus, and Nigeria, with a population currently estimated at 140 mn, is the largest consumer of fish and fishery products in Africa. Shrimps have now become an important and valuable export commodity in Nigeria, where oil and gas, with the current daily production of 2.4 mn barrels, contribute about 90 per cent of the foreign-currency earnings of the country.

Therefore, it is very important to ensure the sustainable contribution of fisheries to the nutritional, economic

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Table 1: Pirate attacks on trawlers in Nigerian coastal waters and their outcome

Year	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
No. of vessels	10	11	38	91	107	95	105	115
No. of deaths recorded	0	0	0	2	6	9	13	15

Source: FDF & NITOA (Pers. Comm.)

companies, operated 153 Nigerian-flagged registered vessels in 2011 (down from 221 vessels in 2001), and contributed between 4.3 and nine per cent of the local fish production.

However, fishing operations by small-scale artisanal and industrial fishermen, as well as research activities in the coastal waters, are being hampered by incessant armed robbery or pirate attacks in the coastal waters of Nigeria, leading to the maiming of captains, fishermen and crew as well as loss of lives and equipment. Pirates have forcefully deprived small-scale artisanal fishermen of their outboard engines, often inflicting bodily harm.

In recent years, piracy has been a major threat to fishing trawlers. However, of late, the ferocity and frequency of pirate attacks have grown out of proportion and beyond the realms of reason. Fishing grounds from Calabar to Lekki are no longer safe or accessible to fishing vessels, both during the day and at night. The NITOA president once asked in desperation: "How productive can you be if you always have to look over your shoulder?"

According to the *Sunday Punch* of 27 February 2011, a Maritime Watchdog Group confirmed the 853 km coastline of Nigeria as the most dangerous in the world because of the sporadic increase in the number of pirate attacks. Reports obtained from Federal Department of Fisheries (FDF) and NITOA indicate that pirate attacks on fishing vessels increased from 10 in 2003 to 115 in 2010 (see Table 1). The frequency of deaths from the attacks increased tremendously from two in 2006 to 15 in 2009. There were about 50 pirate attacks on fishing vessels in January 2011. Of those, 20 occurred in one week during which 10 crew members were killed.

This trend has continued unabated to date.

The adverse effects of pirate attacks on the fishing operators include the following:

- maiming and loss of lives and materials;
- payment of huge compensation to the families of the deceased crew by the fishing companies;
- rendering fishing grounds unsafe and inaccessible, resulting in low catches;
- loss of the outboard engines of artisanal fishermen, and irreplaceable damage to the assets on board trawlers; and
- negative psychological impacts on fishermen and technical crew and sailors.

The fishing industry has high capital outlay on vessels, nets, trawl gear, accessories, jetties, cold storage and processing facilities, workshops and slipways worth more than 150 bn naira (approx. US\$1 mn). It also has an effective market distribution network

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Fishing operations of small-scale and industrial fishermen in Nigeria are being hampered by pirate attacks

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Fishing provides direct and indirect employment to over six million people in Nigeria, including fishermen who are affected by pirate attacks

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and provides direct and indirect employment to over six million, including fishermen, crew, net makers, processors, marketers and others. The industry earns large amounts of foreign exchange, mainly through shrimp exports worth US\$50-60 mn annually (see Table 2). The industry, however, is now on the verge of total collapse as crew members no longer wish to sail.

The operators continue to incur huge financial losses as a result of these pirate attacks.

Competent hands are now moving to the oil industry where they are better assured of safety. In addition, it has become very risky for scientists to conduct research like resource surveys in the inshore coastal waters or board fishing vessels as observers. Placement of students for at-sea, on-board experience, skills acquisition and capacity building for the fishing industry has also been put in abeyance. The situation is more worrisome because of the multi-purpose fisheries and oceanographic research vessel that has been approved by the federal government for acquisition by the

Nigerian Institute for Oceanography and Marine Research (NIOMR). All these prospects, including commercial exploitation of tuna and other pelagic resources in the Nigerian EEZ (dominated by skipjack tuna, which is estimated to have an annual potential yield of 10,000 tonnes) are likely to be jeopardized by continuing sea piracy.

In a nutshell, there is a tremendous cost in terms of economic value from disruption of fishing activities and loss of lives as well as from the hampering of the collection of invaluable research data and information required for sustainable fisheries development.

Stakeholders

The problem of sea piracy should be solved through multi-dimensional and concerted efforts from all stakeholders, including the Nigerian navy, air force, army, marine police, NIOMR, FDF, NITOA, the Nigerian Maritime Administration and Safety Agency (NIMASA), customs and immigration services as well as the artisanal fishermen themselves.

Table 2: Quantity and value of shrimp/prawn exported between 2000-2011

Year	Quantity (Tonnes)	Value (US\$)
2000	6,303.25	39,495,886.22
2001	6,694.21	48,820,467.00
2002	7,372.54	54,053,120.00
2003	6,900.00	48,215,030.00
2004	7,316.16	52,706,370.00
2005	7,179.27	53,379,750.00
2006	7,736.22	46,804,100.00
2007	5,136.67	38,311,320.00
2008	4,694.17	38,207,610.10
2009	4,321.42	38,167,336.24
2010	4,082.95	37,800,022.38
2011	4,390.52	47,843,932.60

Source: FDF, 2007 and 2011. (Pers. Comm.)

At mid-sea, large volumes of shrimp bycatch are bought off the trawlers by canoe fishermen. Proceeds from such transactions, worth millions of naira, which are kept on board the trawlers, have been figured to attract the pirates. It is recommended that sales of bycatch at sea should be prohibited.

Vessel monitoring system (VMS) or other cost-effective communication technology that is compatible with existing technology within the sub-region, should be adopted after due consultations. Harmonization of the fisheries laws and regulations in the sub-region is long overdue and should be undertaken on a priority basis to bring about a uniform regime of application and enforcement. Alternative employment generation for the youth should be explored.

The construction of the proposed east-west coastal road, spanning all the eight coastal States, is long overdue and should be completed fast in order to open up the area and permit access from the hinterland to prevent the unhindered movement of pirates in and out of the coastal waters.

Vigilante groups should be encouraged to be formed in coastal communities.

Recently, the Nigerian navy imported *NNS Thunder* from the US to boost its fleet capability. The March 2012 workshop organized by

the Africa Partnership Station (APS), involving a joint exercise (code named 'Obangame', which is a Cameroonian word meaning 'togetherness') on the fundamentals of policing and fighting sea piracy in the Gulf of Guinea, by the US Navy, in collaboration with Nigeria, Ghana, Cameroon, Sao-Tome and Principe and observers from the Caribbean, is most welcome.

In addition, joint operations of NIMASA and the Nigerian navy are being revamped through the acquisition of platforms and associated electronic surveillance systems through federal government-approved public-private partnership (PPP) arrangements. Under the auspices of NIMASA, a draft sea piracy bill is being prepared with inputs from all stakeholders.

It is hoped that all these efforts and recommendations will bring about a drastic reduction or elimination of armed sea robbery/piracy in the West Africa sub-region. ❧

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