

Beat: Local

Nigerian pirates hijack fuel tanker off Angola in worrying development&

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USPA News - Suspected Nigerian pirates are believed to have hijacked a Liberian-flagged fuel tanker in the Gulf of Guinea off the coast of Angola, its owner said on Wednesday. It would be the most southerly attack to date by Nigerian pirates off West Africa.

Greece-based owner Dynacom Tankers Management, Ltd. said communication with its Liberian-flagged crude oil tanker M/T Kerala was lost on early Saturday morning. "It is suspected that pirates have taken control of the vessel but same is not yet confirmed," the company said in a brief statement. The last known position of the vessel, which has a deadweight of 75,000 tonnes, was about 15 kilometers (9.3 miles) north of the Angolan capital of Luanda at 0100 GMT on Saturday. "Since then, we have taken immediate actions and worked together with authorities to establish communications with the vessel," Dynacom added in its statement. Piracy has been on the rise in the Gulf of Guinea where Nigerian pirates had already pushed their territory westward from Togo to Ivory Coast and south to Gabon. Attacks in the waters off West Africa are often violent, planned and aimed at stealing refined oil products that can be easily sold on the open market. If confirmed, the hijacking of the M/T Kerala would represent the most southerly attack to date by Nigerian pirates off West Africa, according to maritime intelligence agency Dryad. It follows the boarding and hijacking of two other vessels off the coast of Equatorial Guinea earlier this month. "This is a worrying development in West African maritime crime," said Ian Millen, Dryad Maritime's director of intelligence. "We have been watching Nigerian-based pirates launch an increasing number of attacks on vessels in areas not normally associated with piracy of late. If substantiated, this latest incident demonstrates a significant extension of the reach of criminal groups and represents a threat to shipping in areas that were thought to be safe." Nigerian pirates usually force their victims to navigate to locations offshore Niger Delta, where all or a portion of its cargo will be siphoned off to a smaller vessels. "The criminal gangs that conduct this particular brand of intelligence-led maritime crime are well-prepared, well-armed and have specialist maritime knowledge and expertise," Millen explained. He added: "Operations are primarily targeted at ships in offshore anchorages, sometimes during ship-to-ship cargo transfer ops (STS), with attacks mainly conducted under cover of darkness. The criminals usually disable communications and switch off AIS to avoid being detected, meaning that the first indication that owners have of the hijack is normally when they lose contact with the ship."

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