

Pirates attack tanker off Nigeria coast, take 19 crew hostage



Lagos, December 6 (RHC)-- Pirates have kidnapped 19 crew members from a Greek-owned crude oil tanker off Nigeria, the ship's owner and managers said in a statement. The Nave Constellation was attacked about 142 kilometres (77 nautical miles) off Bonny Island, located directly off the southern coast of Nigeria, in an area where acts of piracy have been increasing.

Eight Indians and one Turk from the crew were seized, according to Thursday's joint statement from the tanker's operators, the Greece-based Navios and the Hong Kong-based Anglo-Eastern Tanker Management.

Seven crew members remained on board and were told to take the loaded vessel to a safer position, the statement said. The Hong Kong-flagged supertanker is capable of carrying up to 2m barrels of oil. "All appropriate authorities" have been alerted, and "all the necessary action is being taken to secure their well-being and early release," the statement said.

"We are doing everything necessary to make sure that the 19 crew members will return safe," an official at Navios told Reuters news agency. The vessel was carrying crude for Indian refiner Hindustan Petroleum Corp, a source at the company told Reuters. The vessel was chartered by French oil company Total to deliver Bonny Light oil to Vizag in southern India, the source said.

Meanwhile, an Indian government source said its mission in Nigeria had taken up the matter of the kidnappings with the Nigerian government and security agencies.

The shipping industry has warned in recent months about the increasing dangers faced by seafarers sailing through the Gulf of Guinea, particularly around Nigeria, including kidnappings by pirate gangs, who have shifted away from stealing cargoes towards extracting ransom for crews.

The International Maritime Bureau says the waters now account for about 82 percent of crew kidnappings in the world, and Nigeria has reported more attacks than any other country. "Recently, there has been a noticeable increase in attacks/hijackings/kidnapping of crews off these areas," the bureau's guidance says of Nigeria's oil-rich coast.

The pirates, often well-armed, in many instances have seized ships for many days, ransacking them for fuel. "Generally, all waters in/off Nigeria remain risky," the guidance says, noting that many attacks may have gone unreported.

Earlier this year, the United States and 33 other countries carried out weeks of maritime training in the Gulf of Guinea to improve safety against pirates and better monitor the coastline. Attendees noted the need for better infrastructure, funding and coordination in a region where multiple languages including English, French, Spanish and Portuguese are spoken.

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