

AMBREY INSIGHT BRIEF – WEST AFRICAN OIL (NIGER AND BENIN) PIPELINE

Incident

On the 4th of November 2024, the Niger Blend crude oil pipeline, located upstream of the WAPCO SEME Terminal in Benin, was attacked. While no group claimed responsibility for the assault, it occurred after a warning issued by the Patriotic Liberation Front (FPL) on 22nd of October, in which they threatened to target the pipeline due to political tensions stemming from the 2023 coup. This attack followed the China National Petroleum Corporation's (CNPC) announcement of plans to protect the oil fields using armed UAVs, underscoring the increasing militarization of oil operations in the region.

Context

The Niger-Benin Export Pipeline transports crude oil from the Agadem oil field, Niger to the WAPCO SEME Terminal near Cotonou. Operated by CNPC, the pipeline has a production capacity of around 60,000 barrels of oil per day. The FPL is targeting the pipeline as part of their demands following the 2023 coup. Geopolitical relations between Benin and Niger have also been volatile, marked by periods of tension that have disrupted pipeline operations. The relationship has deteriorated since the coup, when Benin imposed sanctions on Niger. Niger has accused Benin of housing French troops and equipment, with the alleged agenda of launching an intervention to undermine the regime in Niamey. Earlier this year, a significant dispute arose when Benin blocked oil exports after Niger refused to lift a ban on imports from Benin, leading to a complete halt in exports. These tensions have created uncertainty and pose a risk of disruption to downstream merchant shipping. In this context, the Niger-Benin pipeline and its associated infrastructure have become vulnerable to attacks, and political disputes. The pipeline's reliance on security measures, such as the use of armed drones by CNPC to protect the oil fields and transport routes, reflects the increasingly militarized nature of energy extraction and transportation.

On 6th of December 2024, armed criminals carried out a kidnapping onboard a commercial fishing vessel 7NM southwest of the terminal. Five people kidnapped the Master and stole crew's personal belongings. This was the first assessed piracy-related event in more than three years.

Analysis

Ambrey has assessed that attacks on the Niger-Benin pipeline upstream could directly impact merchant shipping, potentially causing temporary disruptions in oil exports from the WAPCO Seme Terminal. Furthermore, geopolitical factors such as sanctions, trade disruptions, and border closures may lead to temporary suspensions of exports from the terminal. Vessels calling at the terminal are required to have armed guards embarked, and their movements are monitored by Cotonou Port Control and the Cotonou Signal Station. Additional security measures are in place, with at least one patrol vessel stationed near the terminal.

Disruptions/delays to vessels calling into the terminal in the Gulf of Guinea could also have indirect consequences for merchant shipping. Vessels forced to wait for a berth may face increased exposure to piracy threats. Vessels approaching the terminal are likely to come from the south, meaning they may transit through an Ambrey dynamic elevated threat area, though given the typical freeboard of the ballast tankers, the risk of a boarding can be low.

Implications

Ambrey has spoken with an owner who has called the terminal several times recently. There were no operational delays reported. Ambrey was able to confirm that the tankers embarked a local naval armed guard team at the terminal, who remained onboard for the duration of the port call. At least one patrol boat was seen on standby close to the terminal.

Mitigations

- Ship Security Assessments (SSAs): Merchant shipping transiting the Gulf of Guinea is advised to carry out SSAs tailored to the threat of piracy, and to implement recommended and proportionate ship protection measures before sailing.
- Port Risk Assessment: Merchant shipping is advised to assess the upstream risk of interruptions, and to assess the risk whilst calling the terminal from armed robbery.
- Voyage Risk Assessments: Merchant shipping is advised to carry out voyage- and vessel-specific risk assessments.
- Live monitoring: Intelligence providers can link merchant vessels to others calling Cotonou and other ports enroute and can link into military organisations to provide real-time awareness of ongoing incidents.
- Armed security: It is mandatory to embark armed security teams whilst calling Beninois territorial seas. Security Escort Vessels are also available and would typically be proportionate when loaded and outbound from this terminal.

For a brief on associated risks and for a West African Guardian service please contact your account manager or intelligence@ambrey.com
