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The United States Naval Forces have joined forces with the Gabonese Navy and other bodies to help Gabon tackle problems of maritime security and illegal fishing

MODERN-DAY PIRATES may have traded in their cutlasses and galleons but today they wield machine guns and speedboats.

Sea piracy is recognised as a growing problem worldwide, responsible for the unlawful seizure of millions of dollars of goods and vessels.

In April, piracy hit the headlines when pirates off the Somali coast took hostage the crew of a French luxury yacht and that of a Spanish fishing trawler, prompting high-profile calls for a United Nations-backed force to tackle piracy at sea.

According to the International Maritime Bureau (IMB), attacks are becoming more violent. The IMB describes the West and Central African coast as also being of particular concern, ranking the Gulf of Guinea as "one of the world's most troubled waterways".

Raymond Gilpin of the Centre for Contemporary Conflict said: "Since the late 1990s, this sub-region has consistently ranked among the top piracy hot spots worldwide."

To help tackle this problem, Gabon recently received a visit from the US Navy vessel *Fort McHenry*, an 11,000-tonne ship in the vanguard of the Africa Partnership Station (APS) initiative, a US Naval Forces Europe-led operation.

The amphibious-landing ship began its deployment in providing active-training services in November 2007 to Gabon, Senegal, Liberia, Ghana, Cameroon, Togo, Angola and São Tomé and Príncipe. APS will also be supporting more than 20 humanitarian assistance projects during the operation.

"APS is an important mission, not only for the US Navy but for our African and European partners," said US Sixth Fleet Commander

Vice Admiral James Winnefeld. "It is about helping African nations become self-sustainable in building maritime security and safety."

He added that African prosperity and stability were being threatened by lack of governance in the maritime environment, leading to illegal fishing, drug trading, human smuggling, oil smuggling and environmental challenges. "We all realise that a stable and prosperous Africa is not just good for Africans; it is good for the rest of the world," he said.

"It's exciting to get underway with this unique group of participating agencies, some of whom we have never worked with before in this part of the world," said Captain John Nowell, APS Commander. "We're looking forward to working with our partner nations in the Gulf of Guinea, exchanging ideas with them and further strengthening our ties."

The *Fort McHenry* first visited the port of →

INDUSTRIAL VESSELS ARE RESTRICTED FROM FISHING WITHIN THREE NAUTICAL MILES OF THE GABONESE COASTLINE

Owendo in Gabon's capital city of Libreville before sailing for Port Gentil on the west coast. "We are focusing on Port Gentil because that is where the biggest concentration of Gabonese Marines and Navy are," explained Lieutenant Commander Marcel Mihindou of the Gabonese Navy. "We are heading there to train as many people as we can. We expect over a hundred Gabonese military people will be trained on board."

The Gulf of Guinea is also currently suffering from another kind of foreign invasion – fishing ships intent on taking advantage of its rich fish stocks. Some vessels have licences but others are operating illegally and robbing coastal nations of valuable income.

Flouting of fishing rules

In Gabon, the problem is exacerbated by licensed industrial trawlers exceeding coastal buffer zones established to protect small-scale local fisheries or waters within the boundaries of the national parks and designed to provide a safe haven for endangered species.

Industrial vessels in Gabonese waters are restricted from fishing within three nautical miles of the coast, and further still where tighter restrictions have been set up to protect bays, lagoons and river mouths, but the rules are often flouted. Marine stocks are also being hit by trawlers using small-mesh nets designed for shrimp, capturing juvenile fish and then throwing them overboard.

Mayumba, Gabon's southernmost coastal town, was the focus of an operation to tackle these over-fishing problems during a 10-day APS mission to support improved maritime domain awareness in the region, focusing on the park which protects a 900-sq-km area of coastal waters. Its coastline is characterised by long exposed sandy beaches and extensive tidal lagoons.

Mayumba relies heavily on fishing, but in recent years its fishermen have experienced reduced catches and reported repeated sightings of industrial trawlers within restricted areas. "To avoid detection, illegal trawlers sail into Mayumba Bay at night, which also poses safety threats to local nocturnal fishermen," said Richard Parnell, director of the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) project in Mayumba.

During the operation, a US Navy team made repairs to Gabonese Navy patrol craft and provided classroom and practical instruction in

engine maintenance, boat handling and navigation. The team was based on the high-speed vessel *Swift*, a 1,000-tonne catamaran that serves as a command facility for the APS project and is designed for hosting training courses and carrying small landing craft.

The main audience for the training were sailors of the Gabonese Navy who maintain a base and patrol vessel in Mayumba and are often involved in carrying out surveillance missions launched by the Mayumba Fisheries Office or Mayumba National Park. Also taking part was the park warden Solange Nguouessono and staff from the National Parks Agency, the Department of Fisheries, the Merchant Navy, Mayumba National Park and the WCS boat crew – all of whom play direct or supporting roles in fisheries enforcement efforts in the area.

"This engagement gave us an opportunity to work directly with a mix of stakeholders who are protecting maritime interests," said Navy Captain John Nowell, the APS commander. "The situation in Mayumba is a microcosm of the larger maritime security environment, where various organisations are working towards common goals."

The team was joined by Augustus Vogel from the Navy Office of Oceanography. He identified how the acquisition of satellite imagery could help to accurately map rates of coastal erosion and the topography of the coastline. Such mapping will be a key component in producing models of the effects of climate change and rises in sea levels.

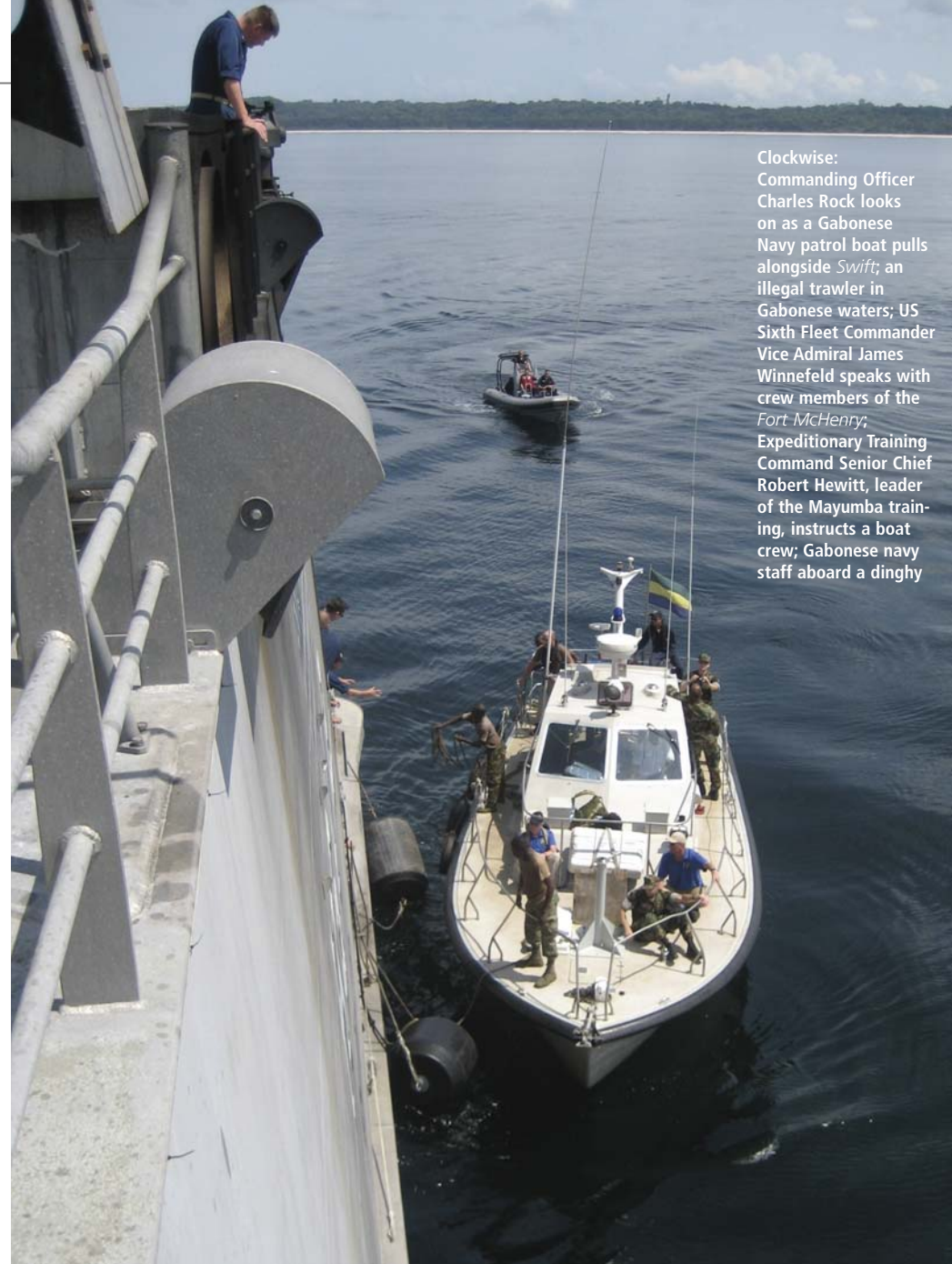
Meanwhile, a team sent to Mayumba by Naval Forces Europe and Africa installed an Automatic Identification System antenna for the Gabonese Navy. Mr Vogel used this to reveal to local government officials and staff those ships which were illegally fishing in the Gulf of Guinea.

"We are very excited about the support," Mr Parnell said. "Along with efforts to expand surveillance missions in the area, we are hopeful that the authorities will soon be making a serious dent in illegal fishing activities here."

At the end of the exercise, the head of the Gabonese Naval Forces, Captain Paul Bivigou Nziengui, flew to Mayumba from Libreville to witness the training in action. His visit highlighted the seriousness of Gabon's engagement with coastal management and security.

Illegal fishermen and pirates beware! ■

Richard Parnell



Clockwise: Commanding Officer Charles Rock looks on as a Gabonese Navy patrol boat pulls alongside *Swift*; an illegal trawler in Gabonese waters; US Sixth Fleet Commander Vice Admiral James Winnefeld speaks with crew members of the *Fort McHenry*; Expeditionary Training Command Senior Chief Robert Hewitt, leader of the Mayumba training, instructs a boat crew; Gabonese navy staff aboard a dinghy



MARINE AMÉRICAINNE : RICHARD PARNELL : GETTY