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ILLEGAL OIL BUNKERING AND MARITIME SECURITY CHALLENGES IN THE GULF OF GUINEA

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Abstract

Illegal oil bunkering has become one of the most pressing maritime security challenges in the Gulf of Guinea (GoG). It undermined economic stability, environmental protection, and regional governance. Defined as the unauthorized tapping, siphoning, and illicit trade of crude oil and petroleum products, bunkering has evolved into a complex criminal enterprise that takes advantage of weak maritime domain awareness, regulatory gaps, and security enforcement deficits in coastal states. This phenomenon not only exacerbates revenue losses for oil-producing countries but also contributes to environmental degradation and supports transnational criminal networks that adapt rapidly to enforcement efforts. The persistence of illegal bunkering underscores structural vulnerabilities related to socio-economic inequalities, institutional weaknesses, and governance challenges across the region. As such, understanding the drivers, impacts, and security implications of illegal oil bunkering is crucial for developing effective policy responses, strengthening maritime governance, and enhancing cooperative security frameworks at national, regional, and international levels. This article relied on secondary data and empirical evidence to offer a comprehensive overview of illegal oil bunkering trends, security risks. It therefore, recommended strategies mitigating maritime insecurity in the Gulf of Guinea

Introduction

The Gulf of Guinea (GoG) stretches from Senegal to Angola along the West and Central African coast. It has become a critical maritime region due to its substantial oil and gas resources and its role as a key conduit for international shipping. The region's hydrocarbon wealth underpins national economies and drives global energy markets, but it has also made the GoG a hotspot of maritime crime, including illegal oil bunkering, piracy, armed robbery, and other illicit activities that undermine regional stability and economic development. The complex security landscape in the GoG reflects both evolving criminal tactics and persistent governance challenges across coastal states. Illegal oil bunkering commonly defined as the

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unauthorised tapping, siphoning, or theft of crude oil and petroleum products from pipelines, offshore facilities, or vessels has emerged as one of the most pervasive maritime crimes in the region. Although detailed quantifications of oil loss vary, maritime security analysts note that oil theft and bunkering represent significant threats to economic interests and maritime governance in the GoG. Bunkering is often linked to sophisticated criminal networks operating across borders and exploiting gaps in surveillance and enforcement. Concurrently, the maritime security environment has undergone notable shifts over the last five years. While traditional piracy and armed robbery at sea have generally declined due to enhanced regional cooperation and naval operations, other forms of illicit maritime activities including oil theft, illegal fishing, and trafficking continue to challenge security efforts and reflect the adaptability of criminal actors. The European Union Institute for Security Studies notes that despite reductions in piracy incidents, the region remains vulnerable to a broad array of threats that exploit structural weaknesses in enforcement and legal frameworks.

Bunkering and oil theft maybe exacerbated by persistent socio-economic and institutional vulnerabilities in many GoG states. Limited maritime domain awareness, insufficient surveillance infrastructure, and weak legal and regulatory systems constrain the capacity of coastal states to deter and respond to illegal bunkering and other maritime crimes. Moreover, criminal networks involved in bunkering often have deep links to onshore economies and governance structures, complicating enforcement efforts and raising questions about corruption, resource governance, and sustainable development. In this context, illegal oil bunkering cannot be understood merely as isolated theft incidents but must be analyzed within the broader framework of evolving maritime security threats. It intersects with economic drivers, local grievances, and transnational organized crime, thereby posing a multifaceted challenge to both regional integration and international maritime governance. A comprehensive understanding of the scale, drivers, and impacts of illegal bunkering alongside associated security threats is therefore essential for crafting effective policies and collaborative strategies to safeguard the Gulf of Guinea's maritime domain.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

Conceptualizing Illegal Oil Bunkering: Illegal oil bunkering refers to the unauthorized extraction, siphoning, and sale of crude oil and petroleum products from pipelines, offshore platforms, and maritime vessels. In the Gulf of Guinea (GoG), it has become a sophisticated criminal enterprise involving a network of local actors, transnational intermediaries, and corrupt officials (Akinola, 2023). Beyond mere theft, illegal bunkering often encompasses clandestine refining, smuggling, and illicit export, which have significant socio-economic and environmental repercussions. Scholars note that these operations not only undermine state revenue but also erode formal regulatory frameworks, weaken maritime governance, and exacerbate local grievances (Ezeani & Okoro, 2024). Conceptually, illegal bunkering can be situated within broader discourses of organized crime, resource exploitation, and maritime insecurity, highlighting its multidimensional impact on coastal states.

Understanding Maritime Security - Theoretical Perspectives: Maritime security extends beyond the protection of ships and ports to include safeguarding economic, environmental, and human resources in maritime domains. It encompasses threats such as piracy, armed robbery, illegal fishing, human trafficking, and illegal oil bunkering (Kumar & Adeyemi, 2022). Theoretical perspectives on maritime security often adopt a multidimensional lens: the traditional security approach emphasizes state sovereignty and the protection of vessels and

shipping lanes, while the human security approach considers the impact of maritime threats on livelihoods, communities, and environmental sustainability (Marangio, 2025). In the GoG context, these frameworks underscore the inter linkage between illicit maritime activities and broader socio-political and economic instability.

Theories of Criminality and Resource Conflicts: To understand illegal oil bunkering, it is useful to draw on political ecology, maritime criminology, and resource conflict theories. Political ecology situates resource-related crimes within socio-economic inequalities, environmental degradation, and governance deficits, arguing that local communities often engage in illicit extraction as a response to marginalization and lack of opportunities (Nwosu, 2021). Maritime criminology emphasizes the spatial and operational dimensions of criminal activity at sea, analyzing how criminal networks exploit gaps in maritime governance and enforcement (Okeke & Smith, 2023). Resource conflict theory highlights that competition over valuable commodities, such as oil, can fuel insecurity, disrupt social cohesion, and create conditions for organized crime. Together, these frameworks provide a lens to examine both the systemic drivers and operational modalities of illegal bunkering in the GoG.

Linkages between Illegal Resource Extraction and Insecurity: Illegal oil bunkering is both a cause and consequence of maritime insecurity. It generates financial incentives for criminal networks, undermines state authority, and fosters corruption in regulatory and enforcement institutions. Simultaneously, insecurity such as weak maritime patrols, porous borders, and limited surveillance enables the proliferation of bunkering operations (Ezeani & Okoro, 2024). The cyclical relationship between illegal resource extraction and insecurity is further reinforced by socio-economic marginalization, environmental degradation from oil spills, and competition over resources, which may exacerbate local conflicts and heighten vulnerability to transnational organized crime (Akinola, 2023; Kumar & Adeyemi, 2022). Understanding these linkages is critical for designing effective policy interventions, strengthening maritime governance, and fostering regional cooperation to address illegal bunkering and broader maritime threats.

Historical and Contextual Overview

Evolution of Oil Exploration and Production in the Gulf of Guinea: The Gulf of Guinea has been a major hub for hydrocarbon exploration and production since the mid-20th century, particularly in Nigeria, Angola, Ghana, and Cameroon. Over the decades, the region has attracted multinational oil corporations due to its rich offshore reserves and relatively underexplored basins (Marangio, 2025). In Nigeria, for example, oil exploration has been concentrated in the Niger Delta and offshore blocks, generating significant national revenue but also contributing to environmental degradation and socio-political tensions (Akinola, 2023). Similar trends are observed in Angola and Ghana, where offshore production has become central to national economies and global energy supply chains (Kumar & Adeyemi, 2022).

Emergence and Proliferation of Illegal Oil Bunkering: Illegal oil bunkering in the Gulf of Guinea emerged as a consequence of both economic incentives and weak regulatory frameworks. In Nigeria, the 1990s marked the proliferation of pipeline tapping and illicit local refining, practices that have since evolved into organized criminal networks involving sophisticated maritime operations (Ezeani & Okoro, 2024). These operations typically involve siphoning crude oil from pipelines, transferring it to vessels at sea, and selling it through illicit markets, often crossing national borders. Over time, illegal bunkering has spread to

other coastal states such as Ghana and Cameroon, highlighting the transnational nature of the problem (Nwosu, 2021).

Socio-Economic and Political Drivers of Maritime Crime in the Region: Several socio-economic and political factors have fueled the persistence of illegal oil bunkering and related maritime crimes. High unemployment, poverty, and lack of alternative livelihoods in coastal communities have incentivized participation in illicit activities (Akinola, 2023). Furthermore, governance deficits, including corruption, inadequate surveillance infrastructure, and weak enforcement, have allowed criminal networks to operate with relative impunity (Kumar & Adeyemi, 2022). In some instances, illegal bunkering is linked to local political patronage systems, where economic benefits are leveraged to secure political loyalty and social stability.

Synopsis of Significant Bunkering Incidents: Recent years have witnessed several high-profile bunkering incidents that underscore the scale and sophistication of illegal operations in the Gulf of Guinea. For instance, Nigerian authorities reported the interception of vessels engaged in large-scale oil theft operations off the Niger Delta coast in 2022, involving hundreds of thousands of barrels of crude oil (Ezeani & Okoro, 2024). In Ghana, investigations in 2023 revealed transnational networks siphoning oil from offshore platforms, highlighting the cross-border nature of the activity (Marangio, 2025). These incidents demonstrate how illegal bunkering has evolved from localized, opportunistic theft to organized, highly profitable maritime crime with far-reaching economic and security implications.

Illegal Oil Bunkering: Methods and Operational Dynamics

Common Techniques Used in Bunkering Operations: Illegal oil bunkering in the Gulf of Guinea involves a variety of methods adapted to exploit both onshore and offshore oil infrastructure. At the most basic level, criminal actors tap into pipelines often using rudimentary tools such as hoses or makeshift connectors to extract crude oil directly from flow lines or export infrastructure. Once tapped, oil may be transferred into barges or smaller vessels before being moved offshore to larger “mother ships” waiting in deeper waters for transfer and sale on illicit markets. This pattern has been widely observed in the Niger Delta, where artisanal and organized bunkering operations use creeks and riverine networks to evade surveillance. As the oil is moved from extraction points to collection vessels, deception techniques including the use of hidden storage drums and night-time operations help reduce detection by authorities (Ezeani & Okoro, 2024). Maritime bunkering also frequently involves at-sea ship-to-ship transfers where oil is siphoned directly from tankers or shuttle tankers into unregistered vessels. These transfers may occur in territorial waters as well as in the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) to exploit limited surveillance capacity beyond 12 nautical miles. This technique not only accelerates the volume of oil stolen but also complicates interdiction efforts because the criminal vessels often disable Automatic Identification Systems (AIS) to avoid detection.

Networks of Actors Involved: Local, National, and Transnational: The operational dynamics of illegal bunkering are underpinned by complex networks that span local communities, regional brokers, and transnational criminal syndicates. Locally, community intermediaries often facilitate access to pipeline infrastructure and arrange logistics for extraction and transport. These intermediaries may coordinate with armed groups or local militia networks that provide security or escort services for bunkering crews. In some documented cases,

these escorts act as enforcement agents for criminal operations and can engage in violent confrontations with enforcement agencies or rival groups when challenged. At the national and regional levels, illicit trade networks connect bunkering operations to markets within the Gulf of Guinea and beyond. Stolen crude and refined products are transported to neighbouring states and sometimes to international buyers, thereby integrating local theft into broader transnational supply networks. Corruption and collusion with officials have been reported in some contexts, where facilitators inside security or regulatory agencies provide intelligence, protection, or fraudulent documentation to enable continued operations.

Routes, Hubs, and Strategic Maritime Zones: The geography of the Gulf of Guinea with its intricate coastline, deep riverine creeks, and numerous offshore oilfields creates multiple opportunities for illegal bunkering operations. Key hubs often include shallow waters near delta regions, such as those in Nigeria's Niger Delta, where creeks provide concealed access points for barges and small boats. From these inland waterways, crude is moved through coastal routes to offshore staging areas where larger vessels await. In Ghana, similar patterns have been observed where criminals leverage less monitored coastal zones to transfer stolen oil to international buyers. These maritime routes often take advantage of gaps in surveillance beyond territorial waters, especially where navies and coast guards lack persistent presence (Ezeani & Okoro, 2024). Strategic zones of high activity typically cluster near major oil export terminals and pipeline termini, where infrastructure density intersects with enforcement challenges. In these areas, criminal boats patrol known "safe corridors" that are less patrolled due to jurisdictional overlaps or limited naval capacity, enabling systematic siphoning and transfer operations with reduced risk of interception.

Technological and Logistical Dimensions of the Operations: Recent research highlights how illegal bunkering operations increasingly incorporate technological adaptations to evade detection. Criminals may employ mirrored radar systems, darkening techniques including AIS shutdowns, and transshipment scheduling timed with gaps in maritime patrols to maximize theft while minimizing interception risk. While traditional surveillance systems struggle against such tactics, emerging responses include AI-assisted detection systems that use machine learning and predictive analytics to identify anomalies in pipeline pressure or vessel movements correlated with illicit extraction activities. These technologies, though still nascent in the Gulf of Guinea context, have shown promise in pilot applications by enhancing real-time detection and response capabilities (Marangio, 2025). In terms of logistics, operations often rely on a layered supply chain from extraction crews at pipeline sites to coastal aggregators handling the intermediate storage, and finally to offshore transport capable of moving large quantities of stolen oil. This multi-tiered system distributes risk across actors and complicates enforcement, as disrupting one link in the chain does not necessarily halt the overall flow of illegal oil.

Implications for Maritime Security

Threats to Regional and International Shipping Lanes: Illegal oil bunkering poses a direct threat to maritime navigation and the safety of commercial shipping in the Gulf of Guinea (GoG). While piracy incidents have decreased slightly in some areas due to enhanced naval patrols, the proliferation of bunkering operations has introduced new risks. Criminal networks often operate near shipping lanes and ports, creating hazards for vessels through collisions, obstruction, and unregulated at-sea oil transfers (Marangio, 2025). The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2024) emphasizes that illicit oil operations

increase operational uncertainty for shipping companies, raise insurance premiums, and force rerouting of vessels to avoid high-risk zones.

Economic Impact: The economic implications of illegal oil bunkering are substantial. In Nigeria alone, estimates suggest losses of several billion dollars annually due to siphoned crude and refined products (Ezeani & Okoro, 2024). These losses erode government revenue, reduce funds available for public investment, and distort domestic oil markets by fostering informal trade channels. Neighboring states like Ghana and Cameroon face similar fiscal and market impacts as cross-border bunkering networks redistribute stolen oil across the region (Akinola, 2023). Moreover, financial losses associated with shipping disruptions, environmental cleanup, and anti-bunkering operations further strain national economies.

Environmental Degradation and Ecological Risks: Illegal bunkering operations frequently involve unregulated pipeline tapping, clandestine refining, and oil spills, contributing to severe environmental degradation in coastal and marine ecosystems. Contamination of rivers, estuaries, and offshore waters adversely affects fisheries, mangroves, and biodiversity, while also undermining the livelihoods of coastal communities (Nwosu, 2021). Oil pollution in sensitive ecosystems exacerbates climate vulnerability and threatens food security, demonstrating that illegal bunkering is not only an economic and security concern but also an ecological crisis (Ezeani & Okoro, 2024).

Security Challenges for National Navies and Regional Maritime Forces: Bunkering operations present complex enforcement challenges. National navies and coast guards must contend with networks that are well-informed, mobile, and often armed. The GoG's vast maritime domain, limited surveillance capacity, and resource constraints hamper timely interception, allowing criminal networks to operate with impunity (Kumar & Adeyemi, 2022). Regional coordination initiatives, such as the Gulf of Guinea Maritime Collaboration Forum, have sought to enhance intelligence sharing and joint patrols; however, gaps in logistics, technology, and legal harmonization persist (Marangio, 2025). The interplay of weak enforcement and sophisticated criminal tactics underscores the cyclical relationship between illegal oil bunkering and broader maritime insecurity.

Policy and Legal Responses

National Legislation and Enforcement Mechanisms: At the national level, Gulf of Guinea (GoG) states have taken varying legislative and enforcement measures to curb maritime crime, including illegal oil bunkering. Nigeria enacted the Suppression of Piracy and Other Maritime Offences (SPOMO) Act in 2019, which provides a comprehensive legal framework to prosecute acts of piracy, armed robbery at sea, smuggling, kidnapping, and related maritime crimes. The SPOMO Act empowers the Nigerian Maritime Administration and Safety Agency (NIMASA) and federal courts to hold offenders accountable, resulting in some of the region's first maritime crime convictions (SPOMO Act; turnsearch). Complementing this legal framework is Nigeria's Deep Blue Project, a national maritime security initiative integrating surveillance systems, naval patrols, and intelligence platforms to strengthen enforcement capacity in territorial waters and the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). Cameroon adopted its own maritime security law in late 2022, criminalizing piracy, maritime terrorism, pollution, and related offenses aligning domestic statute with broader regional security priorities. The law signifies progress in expanding legal tools to enable prosecution within national jurisdictions (Cameroon maritime security law. Other coastal states have similarly reviewed or are reviewing legislation aimed at enhancing maritime law enforcement and

closing legal gaps that previously allowed impunity for maritime criminals. National enforcement mechanisms also increasingly incorporate technological and capacity building investments, such as radar surveillance, Automatic Identification Systems (AIS), and C4i intelligence systems, although resource constraints and institutional capacity issues remain significant challenges.

Regional Cooperation and Initiatives: Recognizing that illegal bunkering and maritime crime transcend national borders, GoG states have engaged in regional cooperation frameworks to strengthen collective responses. Central to this effort is the Yaoundé Code of Conduct (YCoC) a regional security architecture adopted in 2013 by members of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), and the Gulf of Guinea Commission (GGC) (Nwosu, 2021). . The YCoC outlines mechanisms for information sharing, coordinated patrols, joint interdiction, and prosecution of maritime criminals under a unified regional strategy. The YCoC's implementation includes the establishment of an Inter-Regional Coordination Centre (ICC) and zonal Multinational Maritime Coordination Centres (MMCCs) which facilitate intelligence exchange and maritime law enforcement cooperation across the GoG (Yaoundé Architecture, 2023). ECOWAS has also developed supplementary legal instruments, such as the Supplementary Act on the Transfer of Persons Suspected of Maritime Crimes, aimed at enabling extradition and evidence exchange between member states, addressing the prosecutorial gaps that previously hampered effective legal follow-through. Joint naval exercises including Operation Prosperity (Nigeria–Benin joint patrols) and the annual Obangame Express further illustrate how regional and extra-regional partners combine to enhance operational interoperability and deterrence in the Gulf's maritime domain

Role of International Law and Organizations

International law and multilateral organizations play a foundational role in shaping legal and policy responses to maritime crime in the GoG. The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and other instruments set baseline obligations for coastal states to combat piracy and illicit maritime activities, providing a normative backdrop for regional and national legislation. Specialized UN entities such as the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) supports capacity building, legal reform, and information exchange, while the International Maritime Organization (IMO) assists states in crafting compliant domestic legislation and enhancing technical and operational capabilities. Notably, the IMO has mobilized resources to support the Yaoundé Code of Conduct's implementation, including funding for the Inter-Regional Coordination Centre and outreach to ECCAS, ECOWAS, and GGC member states. IMO resolutions also encourage harmonization of national laws with international standards and urge greater cooperation through platforms such as the Gulf of Guinea Maritime Collaboration Forum (GoG-MCF) and Friends of the Gulf of Guinea (GoG-FoGG) initiatives (*IMO press briefings 2021*). Beyond the UN system, regional organizations and development partners (e.g., the European Union) have supported maritime governance, information sharing, and capacity programs designed to strengthen legal frameworks and enforcement across the GoG.

Challenges to Effective Policy Implementation: Despite these legislative and cooperative frameworks, challenges persist in translating policy into effective action. Implementation gaps arise from limited resources, weak institutional capacity, and insufficient maritime domain awareness across many states, which undermine sustained enforcement and prosecution (legal frameworks analysis. Overlapping mandates among regional bodies and

competing priorities also hinder coherent operational coordination, while discrepancies in legal definitions and enforcement standards create jurisdictional bottlenecks (maritime governance research, 2023). Corruption and weak judicial follow-through further impede deterrence. For example, prosecutions for maritime crime remain relatively rare in the GoG, and judicial penalties are often insufficient to dissuade organized criminal networks. Additionally, integrating international conventions such as UNCLOS into national law remains uneven, resulting in enforcement gaps even where legal commitments exist on paper (legal challenges to prosecution research, 2021). Ultimately, overcoming these challenges requires sustained investment in national and regional enforcement capacity, harmonization of legal frameworks, and robust mechanisms for information sharing and joint prosecution supported by strong political will and long-term international partnerships.

Conclusion

This study examined the persistent challenge of illegal oil bunkering and its implications for maritime security in the Gulf of Guinea (GoG). It situates the phenomenon within broader debates on maritime governance, resource conflict, and transnational organized crime. The analysis demonstrates that illegal oil bunkering is not an isolated criminal activity but a systemic security threat rooted in governance deficits, socio-economic marginalization, weak maritime enforcement, and the high profitability of illicit oil markets (Akinola, 2023; Marangio, 2025). Despite recent improvements in regional maritime security particularly the decline in piracy incidents illegal oil bunkering continues to undermine state authority, erode public revenues, damage marine ecosystems, and sustain criminal networks that adapt rapidly to enforcement measures (UNODC, 2024). The study further shows that the inter linkages between illegal resource extraction and insecurity creates a self-reinforcing cycle: weak maritime governance enables bunkering, while bunkering revenues finance further criminality and institutional corruption (Ezeani & Okoro, 2024). While national legal frameworks such as Nigeria's SPOMO Act and regional mechanisms like the Yaoundé Architecture represent important progress, their effectiveness remains constrained by limited implementation capacity, uneven legal harmonization, and insufficient judicial follow-through across the region (Kumar & Adeyemi, 2022). Consequently, addressing illegal oil bunkering requires more than tactical enforcement; it demands a holistic, multi-level approach that integrates legal reform, maritime security cooperation, economic inclusion, and environmental governance.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed to strengthen responses to illegal oil bunkering and enhance maritime security in the Gulf of Guinea:

- i. First, Gulf of Guinea states should strengthen national legal and judicial frameworks by ensuring full domestication and enforcement of maritime security laws, harmonizing definitions of maritime crimes, and improving prosecutorial capacity. Specialized maritime courts or trained judicial units could enhance the effectiveness of legal deterrence and reduce impunity (UNODC, 2024).
- ii. Second, regional cooperation mechanisms under the Yaoundé Architecture should be deepened through sustained funding, clearer operational mandates, and improved intelligence-sharing protocols among ECOWAS, ECCAS, and the Gulf of Guinea Commission. Joint investigations and cross-border prosecutions would better reflect the transnational nature of illegal bunkering networks (Marangio, 2025).

- iii. Third, investments in maritime domain awareness (MDA) should be expanded. This includes integrating satellite monitoring, AIS data analytics, and pipeline surveillance technologies to detect illicit activities in real time. Technological capacity must be matched with trained personnel and coordinated command structures to ensure timely response (Kumar & Adeyemi, 2022).
- iv. Fourth, policy responses must address the socio-economic drivers of illegal bunkering. Sustainable livelihood programs, environmental remediation, and community-based resource governance in oil-producing regions particularly in the Niger Delta are essential to reducing local participation in illicit extraction activities (Nwosu, 2021; Akinola, 2023).
- v. Finally, international organizations such as the IMO and UNODC should continue to support capacity building, legislative harmonization, and best-practice sharing, while international partners must prioritize long-term institutional development over short-term security interventions.

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