

Remarks at Congressional Briefing on Regional Security Threats
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Chairman Smith and Ranking Member Bass, thank you for hosting this informative event today. I appreciate being in the company of my colleagues, the ambassadors of Mali, Mauritius, and Zambia, to discuss with you the topic of regional security threats in Africa.

While political terrorism, religious extremism, civil unrest, and narcotics trafficking are important issues that deserve our attention, I would like to focus on two other headline-grabbing topics that are relevant to the broader question of regional security - namely, maritime piracy and wildlife poaching.

Both piracy and poaching pose threats to regional stability in Central Africa.

Let me first address piracy. Novelist Nick Harkaway has defined piracy as “robbery with violence, often segueing into murder, rape and kidnapping. It is one of the most frightening crimes in the world.”

Not only is it frightening. I would add that it is spreading.

Some of you may have read in the newspapers about a ship that was seized by pirates near Port Gentil, Gabon, just a few days ago. Thankfully, the ship and its 24-member crew were released on Tuesday, with no casualties.

To give you a sense of the international dimensions of this problem, that single ship was registered in Malta, operated by a Turkish company, staffed by an Indian crew, and seized by African pirates within sight of the Gabonese coast.

What's notable about this incident is it is the first of its kind in more than five years near Gabon. What's more, it represents a significant geographic expansion of this sort of piracy.

One expert quoted by Reuters said that the “attack occurred around 200 nautical miles further south than the previous most southerly attack, which was around 160NM southwest of Bonny Island (in Nigeria)” in April. This “marks a significant expansion of the geographical range of Gulf of Guinea piracy” and “demonstrates the regional nature of the illegal fuel trade.”

Over the past 10 or 15 years, the international community has paid close attention to Somali pirates in East Africa. There have even been movies about these pirates made for cinema entertainment. Thanks to strong programs of intervention and interdiction, the threat of Somali piracy has somewhat lessened in recent years.

At the same time, however, the threat has increased in the Gulf of Guinea.

While Somali pirates mostly aim to collect a ransom for the ship and its crew, West African pirates are more interested in the cargo. They hold on to the ships they capture for a few days to do an inventory and then take whatever is valuable, which tends to be petroleum products. Before releasing the vessel, the

pirates pump tons of oil from them to sell on the black market.

Maritime security expert Michael Strahl noted that the Gulf of Guinea pirates are “much quicker at shooting to kill, and they are more brutal with the crew. That could be partly due to the fact they are not primarily interested in hostages, unlike the Somali pirates for whom the hostages are the real capital.”

According to *The Economist*, “security experts say piracy off west Africa is getting worse. Reported incidents jumped from 44 in 2011 to 62 in 2012. This year, with 28 incidents so far, could be the worst ever. Ten of the 2012 assaults on ships in the gulf were hijackings, more than a third of the world’s total.”

Countries in the region are not sitting back and letting piracy expand without a response. Last month in Yaounde, the capital of Cameroon, more than 20 heads of state and government from both the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) gathered for a summit to discuss this topic at length. The result of the conversation was a written commitment to combat piracy in the Gulf of Guinea.

The Code of Conduct adopted at the Yaounde Summit pledges that the participating countries “will share and report information, interdict ships suspected of engaging in illegal activities at sea and ensure criminals are prosecuted. They will also ensure victims of crime – including crew, passengers and other seafarers – receive appropriate care, treatment, and repatriation.”

These countries, including Gabon, are also cooperating with the United States and European nations to combat piracy. We are all victims of this violence. What threatens one of us threatens the entire international community, because it disrupts trade and commerce and affects producers and consumers alike.

Next month, U.S. Secretary of the Navy Ray Mabus will be visiting Gabon with a specific mission to discuss maritime piracy with his counterpart in the Gabonese government and with other officials, including our President Ali Bongo Ondimba. Secretary Mabus will have an opportunity to review Gabonese efforts at expanding our coastal defenses with an aim toward preventing piracy, such as the seizure of the Turkish vessel off Port Gentil last week.

The U.S. Navy Secretary will also be discussing another topic with Gabonese officials: wildlife poaching.

At first glance, it may not be obvious that poaching elephants or other animals is a regional security matter. But it is.

Today wildlife crime is on the increase across Africa and once again the survival of the elephant is in the balance across much of its range. In some countries a deadly war is being waged on a daily basis by wildlife and national parks staff who face armed gangs who are willing to kill to obtain ivory and rhino horn.

Prices for illegally traded ivory and rhino horn have risen exponentially. Today crime syndicates involved in arms, drugs and human trafficking are also dealing in ivory and rhino horn. Our actions over the coming decade will determine whether these iconic species survive.

Earlier this year, journalist Keith Somerville noted how poaching routes through central Africa “suggest a massive and continuing rise in killings and, ominously, the involvement of military and criminal groups such as the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), the Sudanese Janjaweed militia, Chadian poaching gangs and a ring of well-established Darfurian smugglers.”

While trans-border violence is a sobering and serious concern, poaching also leads to domestic corruption.

This past March, Gabonese police arrested a local government official who admitted to assisting elephant poacher in their crimes.

In that case, the head of the Bollossoville subdistrict in northern Gabon, Athanase Edou Mebiame, told police on Saturday 2 March that he provided weapons, munitions and food to poachers and transported ivory across international borders using official vehicles.

Luc Mathot, head of the local group, Conservation Justice, which investigates wildlife crime, said “the fact that a high-level government official is involved in ivory trade shows the corrupting nature of wildlife trafficking, which robs the people of Gabon of their natural heritage.”

The Gabonese government has made anti-poaching activities a high priority, and we hope to enhance our cooperation with the United States and other governments in fighting trans-border poaching.

As you might expect, however, in an era of scarce government resources, every dollar, euro, or CFA franc we spend combating poaching and smuggling is one dollar, euro, or CFA franc unavailable for other law enforcement activities, which can include everything from investigating petty crime to interdicting illegal drugs to fighting human trafficking and participating in regional anti-terrorism programs.

It also subtracts from funds otherwise available for economic development and social welfare programs.

Clearly, while elephant poaching may seem like a local problem – or an ecological issue, or an eco-tourism issue – it is, in fact, a matter of national security and regional stability.

This two security issues – maritime piracy and wild game poaching – are foremost on the list of topics my government hopes to address in the months and years to come. We welcome the support and cooperation of the United States and our neighbors in Central and West Africa, and look forward to success in combating these crimes.

I hope that these brief thoughts stimulate discussion and spark some questions on your part.

Thank you for this opportunity to participate today, and again thanks to Chairman Smith and Ranking Member Bass for extending the invitation to me and the other ambassadors on the platform here.