

Guinea struggles to reel in foreign boats' illegal fishing

October 14 2016, by Abdoulaye Bah



The Marine Resources Assessment Group (MRAG) has estimated that over USD 100 million (90 million euros) in marine products are caught illegally in Guinean waters every year

Idrissa Kallo's expert eyes dart across the waters off Guinea's port capital, Conakry, looking for fish that always seem fewer and far between his nets.

As African governments gather for a summit in Togo aimed at cracking down on [illegal fishing](#), Guinea's corrupt officials and lack of resources to prevent the looting of its waters exemplify the problems facing the continent's west coast.

The Marine Resources Assessment Group (MRAG) has estimated that over \$100 million (90 million euros) in marine products are caught illegally in Guinean waters every year, with the worst offenders being Chinese, South Korean and Spanish trawlers.

"They come here during the night and fish until five or six in the morning, then leave our waters," Kallo told AFP onboard his "pirogue", a narrow wooden fishing vessel typical to west Africa.

"Sometimes the inspectors are complicit, and cut the surveillance systems," he added. "It's the ones who hand out the licences who have been to blame for years now."

A report by Britain's Overseas Development Institute (ODI) estimated in June that more than 300,000 new jobs could be created in Africa if measures such as a global tracking system for fishing vessels were instituted, legal loopholes were closed and vessels who repeatedly infringed the law put on a global blacklist.

The sale of fishing rights to foreigners netted Africa \$400 million in 2014, according to the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization, but could in theory generate \$3.3 billion if the continent's own fleets caught and exported the fish.



As African governments gather for a summit in Togo aimed at cracking down on illegal fishing, Guinea's corrupt officials and lack of resources to prevent the looting of its waters exemplify the problems facing the continent's west coast

Connivance

Taking matters into their own hands when out on the high seas, Guinea's fishermen call their colleagues back on land if they observe suspect behaviour, who in turn pass on the information to the authorities, Kallo said.

"(We) proposed a system of joint surveillance," where fishermen would join inspectors on boats caught in the act. Authorities did not go for it, he said, because it risked unveiling—and thus preventing—corrupt practices.

"When they (inspectors) catch a boat breaking the law, the contents belong to them. It's a business," he claimed.

Due to the poaching, local fishermen's families lose out and so do the people on land whose livelihoods depend on fish. Conakry's famous smoke houses, for example, are almost all staffed by women who can ill afford a collapse in fishing stocks.

The suspicion of connivance between the authorities and illegal trawlers runs deep in Guinea, the sole country in Africa to have been slapped with a ban on imports by the European Union in 2013 for its failure to act on "illegal, unreported and unregulated" fishing.

But the ban was lifted this week after concrete steps were taken to deal with the problem—a well deserved prize, said the man in charge of securing Guinea's seas, maritime commissioner Diomande Doumbouya.



A Chinese fishing ship seized by Guinean authorities, in Conakry on October 8, 2016

A maritime operations centre monitored its waters 24 hours a day, seven days a week, he said, tracking information from GPS systems built into boats.

"If a vessel is engaged in illegal activities, it is reported. We can then board (the vessel) straight away," he added.

They have had some successes: two Chinese vessels were among 14 identified as operating illegally in a joint operation mounted by The Gambia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau and Senegal between August 28 and September 1.

The crews face combined fines of more than three million euros (\$3.3 million), though one of the vessels escaped.

Doumbouya is adamant that the problem is not one of greed, but of poor resources.

"If the state were able to provide speedboats and the means to send out patrols more frequently... that would put these people off," the colonel said, adding that the trawlers simply waited for days when there were no maritime police present.



The sale of fishing rights to foreigners netted Africa \$400 million in 2014, according to the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization

Regional solution?

Guinea's fisheries minister Andre Louah believes the country now has the right data to inform the authorities of the problem, but admits it often lacks the means to do anything about it.

"More than once, I have been informed that there have been unauthorised vessels which were probably fishing illegally in our waters," the minister told AFP.

However, the National Centre for Surveillance and Protection of Fishing (CNSP) failed to respond, Louah said, underlining a fundamental disconnect.

"It's good to have information, but if we don't have the necessary means to get there and board these ships, it becomes a little difficult," he added.

The solution, he believes, is better regional co-operation, of the type that netted the Chinese ships during the summer.

That EU and World Bank-backed monitoring operation was a success of the type the summit in Togo hopes to encourage. Foreign Minister Robert Dussey said ahead of the African Union maritime security summit on Friday the problem had be resolved with a joint effort.

"Most African countries that have a coastline are victims of one of these problems (illegal fishing, pollution, piracy), which is why it's so important for African leaders to sit down and try to find solutions."

© 2016 AFP

Citation: Guinea struggles to reel in foreign boats' illegal fishing (2016, October 14) retrieved 24 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2016-10-guinea-struggles-reel-foreign-boats.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--