

Militancy and Oil Violence in the Niger Delta

Written by Victor Ojakorotu
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The crisis in the Niger Delta of Nigeria is increasingly attracting international attention due both to the growing security threat it portends for the Nigerian state and, particularly, due to its impact on international oil prices. Although the Niger Delta problem has been around for several decades, the emergence of organized and militant pressure groups in the 1990s has added a new dimension to the crisis. Protests and the threat of outright rebellion against the state are now ubiquitous. Environmental activism and militancy are a direct response to the impunity, human rights violations, and perceived neglect of the region by the Nigerian state on the one hand and through sustained environmental hazards imposed on local Niger Delta communities as a result of the oil production activities of multinational oil companies on the other.

From a contemporary global perspective, the dramatic upsurge in violent confrontation and protest against the state and oil multinationals in the 1990s coincided with the end of the Cold War. In essence, 'soft' issues such as the environment, gender equity and equality, human rights, democracy and good governance have attained primacy on the international agenda. International concern over the crisis in the Niger Delta, including its attendant social and humanitarian implications, should be viewed within the context of this global attitudinal shift.

The internationalization of the Niger Delta crisis derives partly from the systematic publicity and struggle of the environmentalist, the late Ken Saro-Wiwa. Saro-Wiwa not only succeeded in directing the attention of the international community to the plight of the people of the Niger Delta but also – through his advocacy – paved the way for robust international/civil society engagement with the issues at the core of the crisis in the region.

More recently, the crisis has taken a new turn with an increasing criminalization of the conflict leading to questions as to why the problem is seemingly spiraling out of control. The spate of criminality (and possible external links to this phenomenon) has given rise to the question around the implications that the Niger Delta problem has for both international and regional peace and security. Also worth probing is how the Nigerian government can re-gain the initiative in finding sustainable solutions to the problem.

Resistance groups in the Niger Delta

Civil society is recognized as an agent of transformation in Africa in the post Cold War era. Over the years civil groups have been suppressed by authoritarian civilian regimes and military dictatorships but the global wave of democracy has allowed these groups to re-emerge as important agents for change actor in politics and governance. While others would argue that

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state repression under successive military regimes prevented the development of civil society, its landscape has been solid and has accounted for the scope of democratic transition in Nigeria. It is wrong to assume that these civil groups emerged with democracy although democracy may have expanded their political space for more involvement. Their emergence was met with antagonism from the state; the central hypothesis of civil society is that it is the force for societal resistance to state excesses and the centerpiece organizationally, materially and ideologically of the social movements and protests for reforms and change. It must be pointed out that it is not only the state that opposed the development of civil society but also private corporations (Ikelegbe,2005).

In third world countries like Nigeria where powerful multinational corporations hold rein, collaboration between them and the state may constitute a situation of double jeopardy in terms of repression of civil society (Ikelegbe,2005). The emergence of social movements in the Niger Delta (as elsewhere) can be placed within a theoretical construct which helps explain the basis of their existence as well as their modus operandi. Expressed differently, social mobilization theories attempt to explain the emergence, objectives, methods and tactics of groups opposed to either the government or transnational forces. Often, these social groupings forge relationships across national frontiers with a view to internationalizing their activities and/or the issues they are seek to address. Given that social movement activity transcends national boundaries, four modes of action define these social networks' overall character. Tarrow identifies four modes of action which define these social networks' overall character. These are: movement diffusion (i.e. temporary interactions that generate similar movement in another state); transnational issue networks (enduring information exchange between main actors within the social movement circle); political exchange (the networking of social groupings in a number of societies); and transnational social movements (interactions between groups with shared visions and ideals). This typology approximates the character of social movement activity in the Niger Delta.

Generally, the emergence of social movements and the internationalization of their activities stem from a number of factors. These include but are not limited to democratization, the ascendance of liberal ideological issues pertaining to the environment, human rights and minority rights, and the revolution in information and communications technology with its attendant integration of the world economies (Batliwala 2004). These variables, which also underscore the collective actions of civil society have combined with local factors to engender the formation and continued existence as well as the transnationalization of social movements in Nigeria. With regard to the Niger Delta, the grievances of the oil communities against the government and multinational oil companies has provided the impetus for social mobilization often but not always along ethnic lines. This found expression in an increase in minority political activity at the elite level, the emergence of different lobbies, the formation of political coalitions, and local community agitation. Cumulatively this lead to a call for more revenue from the nation's oil wealth on the one hand and for more resource control on the other.

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Local people's determination to pursue these issues arose from the, "increasing de-nationalization of the state on a global scale which has seen the rise of sub-state identities as the fulcrum of group rights and citizenship claims" (Adejumobi 2003). The result is that social movements in the Niger Delta have emerged as a result of environmental degradation and the political insensitivity of the Nigerian state. Most of these movements targeted Shell Oil as a means of forcing the Nigerian state to change her policies in the region.

These movements' positions were underpinned by the fact that Shell is the biggest and the most visible foreign oil multinational onshore. Once they could wrestle Shell, other oil companies operating in the region would follow and this underlined the activities of Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP) and Ijaw Youth Council (IYC) in the early 1990s. There were numerous social movements that emerged in this period including the Urhobo Progressive Union (UPU), Isoko Development Union (IDU), Egbesu Boys of Africa (EBA), and Council for Ikwerre Nationality among others.

In order to capture the attention of the international community, MOSOP, one of the early social movements in the region had to use the language of "rights" and built in international fora an image of the Nigerian state and Shell as violators of human rights. The movement also established offices in Europe and the US facilitated visits by researchers and journalists to Ogoni.

Apart from the people of the Niger Delta, there are other segments of the Nigerian populace that aligned with the Federal Government to argue that there is no basis for conflict in the region. However, an in-depth analysis has shown that these oil-bearing communities have been crucial in holding the fragile unity of Nigeria as nation together for over four decades. They have sacrificed in terms of resources and rights in the face of environmental and ecological hazards. Their involvement in this conflict was to force the federal government and the multinational oil companies to acknowledge their plight. The frustration arising from the forceful approach of the federal government and oil companies to bring them to submission underlines their quest for self-determination and autonomy. All they were interested in originally was to be part of the Nigerian state where their rights of existence including opportunities would be guaranteed.

The government's perception of these struggles generated hot controversy to the issues at stake. These conflicts are very sensitive issues that demand a diplomatic approach towards settlement. Unfortunately, the government had been only forthcoming in making sure that its hegemonic status was forcefully imposed and maintained in order to sustain their revenue interests. These factors were borne out by the authoritarian manner the state has used in promulgating decrees aimed at stripping communities of any rights over the land and its

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resources. On another level the multinational oil companies did not accommodate the interests of the oil-bearing communities on capitalist grounds. They continue to be viewed as protecting their capital and interests above all else. They have in most cases influenced the oversight of government institutions charged with environmental protection thereby giving them almost unrestrained access to the resources of the region.

State & oil company response to resistance groups in the Niger Delta

Nigeria today faces considerable pressure from both local and international sources over its policy response to the Niger Delta crisis a subject of intense debate and heated controversy. It is therefore advisable to consider some of the state and oil multinational responses to the crisis intended to ensure uninterrupted oil activities. For the purpose of sustaining the flow of oil across the region the Nigerian state (in collaboration with oil companies) have both regular security arrangements and special task forces. These steps lead to the establishment of the brutal task force known as the Rivers State Internal Security Force, a paramilitary force created on the eve of MOSOP's protest against oil production in Ogoni. Similarly, the core states of the Niger Delta also formed their own special security forces with different names e.g. "Operation Salvage" (created by Bayelsa State to protect oil installations) and "Operation Flush" (established by Rivers State).

The Nigerian state and oil companies have at different times emphasized their commitment to the forceful protection of oil companies' activities and installations. This underscored state leaders' pronouncements of warning against the disruption of oil production since oil is the lifeblood of the country. Indeed the former Petroleum Minister during the Abacha regime, Dan Etete, at various times spoke against violent protest from the local people, insisting that the Abacha administration would not tolerate a situation where every political grievance is taken out on oil installations and operations of oil companies and that 'community leaders should restrain their youths from such acts' as reported by Human Right Watch in 1999. Similarly, Etete stated in 1998 that the destruction of oil companies' property would meet the full wrath of the law since the state was (and still is) in a joint partnership with foreign oil companies. "Since the death of General Sani Abacha in 1998, ethnic youth militant movements such as MEND have threatened at different times to shut down oil installations, to violently disrupt the operations of the MNOCs and, if necessary engage the state security forces in armed encounters" (Gilbert 2007).

"Regardless of its original justification, the current militancy in the Niger Delta appears to have been perverted, misdirected and criminalized by opportunists. It appears that the recent upsurge and attraction to armed conflict and violence by ethnic militias, may have been motivated by crass economic opportunism and profiteering, through hostage taking for ransom

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and through illegal oil bunkering with external commercial networks" (Gilbert, 2007). Aside the militarization of the region by the state and oil companies to sustain the uninterrupted flow of oil, the state also initiated or established institutions to address the demand of the people. The question is how effective are these institutions?

The reaction of the state and that of effected communities can be generalized as follows:

Violation	Oil Company Response	State Response	Community Response
Water Pollution			
Launch community development project(s)			
Militarization of communities			
Make representation/grievance to government			
Farmland Destruction	Supply small arms to government for protection of facilities		
Divide community groups			
Advance dialogue with government			
Destruction of Aquatic Life	Non-responsive	Separate settlement with Public utility, estates	
Wildlife Destruction	Non-responsive	Offers Weak institutional response	Response Taking has occurred
Poor Living Conditions	Offer of part-time employment to community members	Intervention by agency, e.g. OMB, AIC, NDDC	Each

Source: Compiled Data by the author. (2005)

Security implication of the Niger Delta crisis

With the end of the Cold War, there has been renewed academic interest to conceptualize the concept of 'security'. This allows policymakers and scholars to think about security as something more than the military defense of state interests and territory (Paris, 2001). Second, military threats have been the dominant focus of security to the neglect of other areas. (Buzan 1983; Cable 1995; Mastanduno 1998; Nye & Lynn 1998) Leading this new approach at considering issues of security in a new light is the scholar Barry Buzan. He puts forward the idea that security should encompass military, political, economic, societal and environmental aspects.

So what is human security? It is said to have two main aspects. It means first safety from such chronic threats as hunger, diseases and repression. Second, it means protection from sudden and hurtful disruptions in the patterns of daily life –whether in homes, in jobs or in communities

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according to UNDP. A 1994 UNDP report further defined security as having four essential characteristics of human security. These are:

- That human security is a universal concern. The notion of human security is not limited to the poor or rich countries. It recognizes that there are common threats to all people including unemployment, crime, pollution, drugs and human rights violations
- That the components of human security are interdependent. Components of human security are not territorially limited anymore. Famine, floods, pollution, terrorism, ethnic disputes and social integration can no longer be considered isolated events confined within national borders. They have global impact
- That human security is easier to ensure through early prevention than later through intervention. When balanced, the cost of preventive measure are less than the costs of dealing with the aftermath of a security breach. For instance, rather than trying to stem the tide of death and diseases after a disaster, prior emphasis placed on primary health care may lessen the potential damage to the population
- That human security is people –centered. Human security is concerned with how people live and breathe, how they exercise choice, how much access they have to opportunities and whether they live in conflict or peace.

Therefore, one of the biggest security challenges facing African states is the proliferation of small arms and light weapons. This development calls for serious attention from states and regional organizations as it increases tension, and escalates as well as prolongs intra-state conflicts that have characterized Africa in the post-Cold War era. In Nigeria, the trade in small arms and light weapons has fuelled ethnic clashes in the Niger Delta, especially between the Ijaws and their immediate neighbors, the Itsekiri and Urhobos. This relatively novel situation aggravates the security problem in the Niger Delta, as the state struggles to address the perennial conflict in this oil-rich region.

However, the security situation in the region can be viewed from two divergent, mutually exclusive, security conceptions held by the two principal actors in the crisis. While the Nigerian state and the oil multinationals subscribe to the traditional state-centric perspective of security, the local people of the region and other stake holders in the region consider human security as paramount. The clash of these two security conceptions perpetuates conflict in the region over the years.

The traditionalist, state-centric notion of security has over the years informed the repressive militarization of the region. Examples of state repression, in the form of the destruction of communities by state security forces abound: in Umuechem 1990 and 1993, in Uwheru in 2004 and Odioma in 2005 et al.

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On the other hand, the human security paradigm is a broader conception of security that recognizes and accommodates a wider range of issues of human concern such as security from poverty, disease, famine, illiteracy, environmental despoliation, and unemployment, which singly or jointly have contributed to the impairment of human existence. These are the real concerns in the Niger Delta.

This shift from the authoritarian, state-centric view to the notion of human security is premised on the fact that people are the means and end of the development process. That said, this paradigm shift necessitates compromises on both sides: the federal government's demilitarization of the Niger Delta and the Niger Deltans' repudiation of violence and their recognition of the state's role as the primary mode of organization and development. The fact remains that state militarization and militarist actions by Niger Delta groups have been counterproductive (Isike 2008).

Therefore, the Nigerian context, with recent developments in the Niger Delta region, has demonstrated that the proliferation of arms is partly responsible for the continuation of the conflict. This influenced the creation of a national committee on the proliferation and illicit trafficking in small arms and light weapons in the year 2000 amid escalation of violence in the region. Some of the impacts of these armed militias have been:

- Up to 150,000 barrels of crude oil being stolen daily by militants and their local and foreign collaborators since 2008
- The militants have gathered enough military hardware to terrorize other ethnic nationalities in the region, notably the Itsekiri and Urhobo in order to sustain instability in the Niger Delta and to proliferate small arms for robbery and piracy in the Delta region and throughout the country;
- From 2008 till date 33 Joint Task Force, JTF, personnel had been killed, 38 missing, 55 wounded, while 5 military gunboats had been destroyed, 3 seized, 24 automatic weapons and 579 rounds of ammunition captured;
- The militants have attempted, with surface-to-air missiles, to shoot down one naval helicopter and Air Force helicopter
- On May 13, 2009, members of the JTF on routine escort duties around Chanomi creek were ambushed by a militant group killing 11 soldiers. Prior to this, the militants hijacked an NNPC chartered tanker, CMSPIRIT, with both local and foreign crew, some of which were tortured to death and the rest held hostage

Overall a sample of selected cases of abductions/kidnapping for ransom (2002–2003) are summarized in the table below.

Date/Action	Company	Group/Ethnic State	Purpose of Action	Report
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June-July 2003 Staff Kidnapping				
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Oil Servicing Company/Shell Oil Workers Gang,
Ekeremor LGA, Ijaw/ Bayelsa State

Ransom of 3.1 million Naira government intervention-release of hostages after 14 days

November 11-13 2003

Oil Barge Kidnapping of Staff (9) and Military Escorts (4)

Shell barge contractor Ijaw youth militants in Bomadi/Burutu Lgas/ Delta State

Ransom demand of 24.5 NG Naria

Release after 2 days after threats from state and associated security agencies

November 2003 Kidnapping of 14 staff

Chevron Texaco Militant Ijaw youths/Bayelsa State demand State intervention

Kidnapping of 19 staff Nobel Drilling

Ijaw Militias/ Delta State Ransom demand

State in

November-December 2003 Bredero Shaw Oil Servicing (Shell) Ijaw youths/ Delta State demand \$5 million State in

- Sources: Augustine Ikelegbe, 2005, "The Economy of Conflict in the Oil Rich Niger Delta Region of Nigeria", Nordic Journal of African studies 14(2):208-234 and the NNPC Annual Statistical Bulletin 2007/Anyakwee Nsirimovu, 2009

Conclusion

Not to be over emphasized is the need for both government and the oil communities in the Niger Delta to embrace dialogue. The present crisis in the region is partly being fueled by lingering militarist dispositions on both sides. Nigerian political life has been militarized for several years since independence no thanks to years of military rule. This military phenomenon has inculcated a culture of violence in the society. The frequent deployment of military forces to the Niger Delta to quell local riots in recent years has equally further militarized local ethnic militia. Even the present democratic government has not been spared as the recent invasion of communities in the Niger Delta by military forces has demonstrated. In order to stem this tide of violence and armed confrontation in the region, government should systematically de-emphasize the use of maximum force, and embrace the aggrieved communities in meaningful dialogue. However, this can only be achieved by tolerance on both sides.

The question of leadership in the Niger Delta struggle deserves some serious attention while the distribution of government patronage and resources amongst communities and ethnic

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groups in the Niger Delta should also be addressed. The overwhelming reliance on oil revenue derived from its exploitation has done more harm than good to the Nigerian state. Therefore, the government should diversify the economy as the neglect of other economic sectors like agriculture and tourism has remained a bane to Nigeria's development over the years. Looking at the challenges posed by the Niger Delta crisis, Nigeria would risk further crisis and tension in the region if the state failed to accept dialogue and rational bargaining with the local people from the region. On the other hand oil multinationals have a role to play in order to guarantee their operations in the Niger Delta. The Niger Delta problem cannot be resolved without dealing with the youths that have been at the forefront of the struggle since 1990s.

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