

Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND)

**POLITICAL MARGINALIZATION, REPRESSION
AND PETRO-INSURGENCY IN THE NIGER DELTA**

ELIAS COURSON

DISCUSSION PAPER 47

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Foreword

This Discussion Paper explores the emergence of the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) in the context of a full-blown insurgency linked to local resistance and violence in Nigeria's oil-rich Niger Delta. By focusing on MEND, an armed group that has been largely responsible for the escalation of the struggle by the ethnic minorities of the Niger Delta into an armed phase since late 2005, the author draws attention to the roots, causes and complex dynamics underpinning the violent conflict and insecurity in the region. This study is both timely and important as it focuses on a festering local conflict that is of great significance to political stability in Nigeria's multi-ethnic federation, as well as to global energy security considering the high stakes involved as the region hosts Africa's most productive oil fields.

The importance of this study lies in the ways it interrogates some of the existing perspectives to armed conflict in resource-rich contexts by providing a systematic analysis of the roots and drivers of violence in the Niger Delta. By examining the complex connections between the political economy of oil and the ways it has fed into the politics of dispossession, the history of ethnic minority agitation, resource control, and the vicious cycle of repression and insurgency, the author provides a good case study of the oil-conflict nexus in Nigeria.

It also introduces some interesting perspectives to the linkages at the local-national-global levels in the conflict in the region. Although active in the Niger Delta the impact of MEND's attacks has been felt both nationally and globally. Attacks by MEND and other armed groups have led to the loss of a quarter of Nigeria's daily oil exports since 2006. This has adversely affected the revenue base of the Nigerian government, the profit margins of international oil companies operating in the region, and disrupted global oil supplies, contributing to rising prices in the volatile oil markets.

Located in West Africa's oil-rich Gulf of Guinea, the Niger Delta is strategic to the energy security calculations of the world's established and emerging powers: the United States, France, the United Kingdom, Russia, China and India. For this reason, the crisis in the Niger Delta has attracted a lot of international attention and concern underscoring both the high stakes involved and the importance of ending the conflict and building sustainable peace in the region. MEND's propaganda machinery has also been active at the national and global levels in seeking attention for its local course.

By focusing on MEND, this study casts more light on its origins, methods, strategies and objectives. It also nuances some of the more complex aspects of the conflicts in the oil-rich region, providing to some extent a basis for understanding some of the contradictions and ambivalence within MEND itself, and other actors, local and international involved in the conflict. Beyond this, it provides a sound basis for grappling with the challenge of resolving the complex conflict, starting with a review of some of the more recent efforts of various Nigerian governments, and calling attention to the need to tackle the problem from its roots. The analysis and material contained in this Discussion Paper should be of interest to scholars of conflict and peace in Africa, strategic and energy analysts, as well as policy makers working in the fields of democracy and development on the continent.

Cyril I. Obi

Senior Researcher, Leader

Research Cluster on Conflict, Displacement and Transformation,

The Nordic Africa Institute, Uppsala

*It is... incredible that wherever prime raw material is discovered the locals die in misery, their sons become soldiers, and their daughters are turned into servants and whores.*¹

Huber Sauper

*...remember your seventy-year-old grandmother who still farms before she eats; remember also your poverty stricken people; remember too your petroleum which is being pumped out daily from your veins, and then fight for your freedom.*²

Isaac Jasper Adaka Boro

Introduction

The oil-rich Niger Delta region of Nigeria is currently mired in a major insurgency by MEND militants attacking oil multinationals, oil installations and government security forces. On the face of it, the MEND insurgency appears to be a classic example of the “resource curse” thesis that seeks to establish strong connections between natural resource abundance, the paradox of plenty and violent conflict in third world countries. The propensity for resource conflict and its dynamics in third world countries has been explored in studies by Collier and Hoeffler (2000, 2002 and 2004), and Ross (2001, 2003, 2004) among other scholars. Of note is the view that resource wealth acts as an incentive to greedy/corrupt actors who conspire at conflict as a way of “making good out of war”. More recently, the analysis has gone beyond, “war economies” towards providing explanations for how resource abundance feeds the paradox of plenty, and a dangerous mix of corruption, poverty, conflict, and state failure, which also generates serious threats to global security and development (Collier, 2007). This study also interrogates the claims of the resource curse perspective, which draws linkages between resource abundance and violent conflict based on the case of MEND in the Niger Delta. In this regard the fundamental question is whether the MEND insurgency is propelled merely by greed or by deep-seated grievances?

Since late 2005, the resistance against the state and multinational oil corporations operating in the Niger Delta region has taken a more violent and sophisticated turn with the emergence of MEND. Attacks on oil facilities and the abduction of expatriate and local oil workers (and family members in some cases) by insurgents has been on the rise. The activities of this and other groups operating in the region have resulted in the shutting-in of about a quarter of the nation’s daily oil production. The crisis is however the direct culmination of largely unaddressed grievances such as land dispossession and pollution, marginalization and political repression. For instance, the UNDP (2006:36) report on Human Development in the Niger Delta puts the poverty rate in the whole of the South-South region of Nigeria (including the Niger Delta) at 74.8% and further as-

1. Hubert Sauper, 2004, “Darwin’s Nightmare” – Documentary, France/Austria/Belgium (<http://www.darwin-nightmare.com/darwin/html/startset.htm>)

2. Isaac Jasper Adaka Boro addressing his 59-man ragtag army before the first revolt against the oil multinationals and the Nigerian government in 1966. See Tebekaemi (ed.), 1982, p. 117.

serts that “local people often cannot tap directly into the oil industry benefits, including employment, because they lack skills or capital resources or both” required for participation in the industry.

MEND is the most recent resistance group in the Niger Delta region. The group seeks to win the right of local oil producing communities to participate in Nigeria’s oil industry. This is with a view to securing benefits – royalties, employment, infrastructure, and compensation for the degraded environment caused by oil activities – from the federal government and oil companies. The on-going insurgency in the delta of Nigeria feeds on the deliberate targeting of government and oil companies by armed groups claiming to represent the impoverished, marginalized, dispossessed and poverty ravaged people of the region, who have been alienated from the wealth produced from their lands.

The Niger Delta and the Oil Factor

The Niger Delta covers an area of about 70,000 square kilometers, and is considered the largest wetlands in Africa. It is also one of the world’s three largest mangrove forests covering about 6,000 square kilometers.¹ The region is a swampy maze of creeks, mangroves, streams, estuaries and rivers, with a population of about 28 million (2002 Census figure in Nigeria). The area is peopled predominantly by minority ethnic nationalities, with the Ijons (Ijaws) as the largest group. Ironically, this swampy region is home to Nigeria’s enormous oil and gas wealth, which constitutes the mainstay of Nigeria’s economy. The oil produced from the Niger Delta accounts for about 95% of Nigeria’s foreign exchange earnings, and 80 per cent of federal government revenues. In spite of the immense wealth generated from the Niger Delta, its impact is not felt within the region, a situation that is further worsened by the deleterious impact of the oil industry on the region’s fragile ecosystem and wetland.² Thus, while oil production has generated wealth on the one hand for oil companies and ruling elites, it has also resulted in human suffering for local people in the Niger Delta. Some of them associate the internal displacement from their ancestral peasant agrarian economy with the activities of oil corporations and state repression of community protests. The effects of such dire social, economic and human development impediments underpin the crises that prevail in the Niger Delta communities today.³

Since the discovery of oil and inception of oil production in the Niger Delta in 1956 and 1958 respectively, the people and oil-bearing communities of the delta have experienced increasing ecological degradation cum poverty. In a recent report by UNDP (2006:36-37) on the human development situation in the delta, it was observed that “a critical issue in the delta is not only the increasing incidence of poverty, but also the intense feeling among the people that they ought to do far better given the enormous resources flowing from their region”. The report further states that “poverty has become a way of life due to economic stagnation, unemployment, poor quality of life due to shortages of essential goods and facilities, an unhealthy environment and government insensitivity”. The UNDP (2006) report conceives poverty in the Niger Delta as “en-

1. Civil Liberties Organization, 2002, p. 9.

2. Alamiyeseigha, 2005.

3. Human Rights Watch, 1999.

compassing issues of discrimination, neglect and lack of a voice". In the Niger Delta, ecological devastation from oil or its derivatives starts from exploration when explosive mechanisms are used and drilling is undertaken. The environmental abuse continues at the production level when "unnecessary" gas is flared indiscriminately and the transportation stage when channels are created that allow for salt water intrusion into fresh water (the people's source of drinking water) or when the crude or refined products are pumped through pipes that are old and rusty resulting in leakages/blow-outs/spills that pollute the fragile ecosystem. The network of oil infrastructure: oil pipelines, flow-stations, rigs, terminals and wellheads that criss-cross the entire Niger Delta region places further pressure on the relatively scarce land in the face of growing population pressures.

The assault on the Niger Delta environment by the oil industry is directed at the land, water and air. In a study by a group of sixty-five Nobel Laureates comprising the Commission of Nobel Laureates on Peace, Equity and Development in the Niger Delta in 2006, it was estimated that about 7,000 oil spills occurred in the Niger Delta between 1970-2000,¹ with devastating consequences for the environment and local livelihoods. Mrs. Halima Alao, then Nigerian Minister for Environment, Housing and Urban Development at a national workshop on the "Finalization of Environmental Security Index Imaging in Nigeria" also noted that Nigeria recorded 418 oil spill cases in the first six months of 2008.² The Minister stressed the great danger posed to Nigeria, the environment, and the social and economic well-being of the people of the Niger Delta, by oil spills. She therefore, emphasized the need for the government to acquire the sensitive technical know-how necessary for the challenges of protecting the sensitive ecosystem of the Niger Delta area.³ The damage to the Niger Delta environment should be taken in the context of the observation by the President of the Nigerian Association of Petroleum Explorationists (NAPE), Dr. Emmanuel Enu, on October 2007, that Nigeria and the oil companies had extracted about 100 billion barrels of oil from the Niger Delta since the commodity was discovered at Oloibiri in 1956.⁴ Based on the foregoing estimate, it could be extrapolated that Nigeria has earned about US\$600 billion from oil and gas exploration from this marshy and "difficult" terrain since the inception of oil exports in 1958.

According to Ken Saro-Wiwa, the environment is man's first right: the absence of a safe environment makes it impossible for man to fight for other rights: be they economic, social or political.⁵ The consistent oil spills and gas flares in the Niger Delta have degraded the environment, driven the people out of their farming and fishing trade and enthroned endemic poverty. The land and waters on which the people of the Niger Delta depend for their survival (subsistence existence) have either been taken over by the oil companies and their for-profit operations, or polluted. Thus, these local people have been dispossessed and sometimes displaced from their homes. As a result, their means of subsistence and dignity are destroyed without any alternative or adequate compensation

1. Watts and Kashi (eds), 2008, pp. 218-210.

2. *Vanguard* Newspaper, Lagos, Wednesday October 29, 2008.

3. *Ibid.*

4. Chris Akiri in the *Guardian* Newspaper, "The Niger Delta and the Conquistadors", Monday, September 29, 2008.

5. Ken Saro-Wiwa, 2004, p. 49.

being provided. The situation has been further compounded by decades of neglect by successive governments, and the more recent militarization of the region as a response to rising local protests. The cumulative effect of this “omnicidal” war poses enormous danger both for the fragile ecosystem and the people who have lived and continue to live in this maze of creeks. Hence, the protests by communities against the excesses of a petro-capitalism that rides roughshod over the rights and humanity of the ethnic minorities of the Niger Delta.

Resource Conflict: Some Conceptual Issues

Some scholars assume that the absence of democratic governance and the lack of opportunities for the amicable resolution of political disputes lead to violent conflict. Others attribute conflicts to deep-seated ethnic and religious cleavages and differences, while some radicals on the left link conflict to economic inequality or to deep-rooted social contradictions often the legacy of colonialism.¹

Recent studies have attributed the prevalence of armed conflict in most third world countries to the abundance of natural resources, such as oil – based on the “resource curse” discourse. Such studies seek to empirically show that countries with natural resources are more likely to be involved in armed conflict than countries that have no natural resources. Scholars like Ross (2004) and Addison (2003) have linked the outbreak or prolonging of violent conflict in third world countries to abundant resource endowments – which feed into corruption, struggles over resources, and political instability. According to protagonists of this position, the need for oil from endowed developing third world countries has contributed to the on-going conflict dynamics in oil bearing third world countries (Cramer, 1988). Oil is globally strategic; it is the basic foundation of energy for modern civilization, and the fuel for modern industrialization.

For instance, Ross (2003) argues that since the oil boom of the 1970s, Nigeria, an OPEC member and major player in the global oil trade has done so little to raise citizens’ income and alleviate poverty in the land. This is alarming considering the amount of revenue derived from oil in Nigeria. Ross (2003) identified five spheres that the political economy of oil has affected in the Nigerian nation: “causing economic volatility, crowding out the manufacturing and agricultural sectors, heightening inequality, inducing violent conflict and undermining democracy”. And to add to Ross’ list, the oil wealth in Nigeria has fuelled elite-led ethnic politics, political instability, corruption and electoral fraud.

Collier and Hoeffler (1998, 2000) and Ross (2004) identified oil-endowed developing countries as having a high risk of experiencing armed conflict. According to the resource curse perspective, conflicts in Angola (oil), Burma (tin, gems), DRC (copper), Sudan (oil), Indonesia (natural gas), Morocco (oil) and Nigeria (oil) can be attributed to the destabilizing and conflict element in the resource abundance-development linkage.

Following from this, Collier and Hoeffler (2000) and Ikelegbe (2006) present greed and opportunism as the motivating factors/incentives for armed groups to engage in conflict. Ikelegbe (2006), also notes how economic interests fuel conflicts. By drawing

1. Collier, et al., 2003.

on the case of a resource endowed country, Nigeria, he points out that foreign mining and mineral exploiting companies enter into partnership with state or non-state actors to have unhindered access into the legal or illegal trade of primary resource exploration and exploitation. Ross (2004) situates the propensity for conflict and its duration at the door-step of “lootability” of the commodity concerned. He further opines that the global significance, use and demand of such a “lootable” primary resource is a propensity for the emergence of armed conflict in developing countries such as Nigeria.

The problems of governance, educational attainment (the lack of it) and income levels are also identified by Oyefusi (2007) as the immediate cause of armed conflict in resource-endowed countries, especially Nigeria. Collier and Hoeffler (1999) in their empirical analysis of the propensity to conflict in the third world espoused three grievances from the demand for justice: hatreds arising from relations between distinct social groups, repression in the process of political decision making, and poor economic outcomes. On their part, Elbadawi and Sambanis (2000) see the lack or absence of political and economic development as the root cause of conflicts in the African continent.

In spite of its attractions, not all scholars buy into the resource curse perspective to violent conflict. Ifeka (2000) sees conflict, especially in the Niger Delta as the consequence or reflection of political repression and undemocratic practices by erstwhile military dictators. In this regard, Ikelegbe (2006) and Reno (2003) have rightly expressed the idea that a primary resource in/by itself does not engender conflict; rather it is the complex struggles by various classes, fractions and groups, local, national and international, with regard to the manner of *extraction*, management, appropriation and *distribution of benefits* that propel and fuel armed conflict.

One major factor that some scholars of conflict have often over-looked is the role “corporate resource imperialism” plays in generating violent conflict in many developing countries. Girvan (1976) notes that dependence, underdevelopment and endemic crisis are largely generated by corporate imperialism. He argues that, the fundamental power in the world is held by the owners and managers of global capital, who exercise power over classes, groups and institutions for the appropriation of resources and the maximization of profit. This quest for global resources and markets generates profits for shareholders and the owners of global capital on the one hand, but also leads to the wanton exploitation and pollution of other parts of the world, including the expropriation of peasants whose rights, lands, waters and means of livelihood are taken away to satisfy corporate greed for super-profit. In the Nigerian case, the dichotomies and contradictions between the exploiters (government and oil corporations) and the exploited (oil-bearing ethnic minority communities of the Niger Delta) lie at the heart of the conflict in the region.

What flows from the foregoing is that the conflict pitches the Nigeria state-oil multinationals partnership that seeks to dominate and exploit the oil-rich delta against the local people of the oil-bearing ethnic minority region who seek to gain control of the oil resource – to claim its benefits for the development of the region, and resist the wanton exploitation and pollution of their region in ways that threaten their rights and survival.

The adverse effects of the oil and gas industry on the fragile eco-system of the Niger Delta are huge. These include the impact on local sources of livelihood – land, water, and air (as in the case of the Niger Delta) – coupled with poverty, unemployment, deprivation, and dispossession. This is further complicated by the repression of oil community protests against the oil industry which worsens the relations between the communities and the oil companies.

Resistance in the Niger Delta

The activities of the multinational oil corporations and the government have not gone unchallenged in the Niger Delta. The earliest post-independence act of armed resistance was led by a former teacher, police-officer, students' union leader and activist of Ijaw ethnic minority extraction: Isaac Jasper Adaka Boro. In the early hours of February 23, 1966 (just a decade after the discovery oil in the Niger Delta) Adaka Boro and his 59-man Niger Delta Volunteer Service (NDVS) declared "The Niger Delta Republic, distinct and separate from Nigeria" (Tebekaemi, 1982:119-120). Adaka Boro and his compatriots' "12-Day Revolution" was provoked by what they saw as social neglect, ethnic chauvinism, political marginalization and economic deprivation, orchestrated by Nigeria's post-independent ruling elites. This much was made clear by Boro, while addressing his men (Tebekaemi, 1982:116):

Let us examine with some latitude whether the state of development is to any extent commensurate with a tint of the bulk of already tapped mineral and agricultural resources... Therefore, remember your seventy-year-old grandmother who still farms before she eats; remember also your poverty stricken people; remember too your petroleum which is being pumped out daily from your veins, and then fight for your freedom.

The Adaka Boro-led uprising was however crushed by federal troops after twelve days. Boro was subsequently arrested alongside some of his men, tried for treasonable felony, found guilty and sentenced to death. The death sentence was commuted to life imprisonment, and he was released by the new military government that emerged after the July 1966 counter-coup and later fought on the federal side during the Nigerian civil war (1967-1970). He was killed towards the end of the war in controversial circumstances, making some of his supporters suspect that he was assassinated.

The end of the Nigerian civil war coincided with the increase in oil prices, which propelled Nigeria from a relatively poor cash crop exporter into the rank of a wealthy petro-dollar dominated economy. The resulting oil boom fuelled increased government expenditure at all levels. The rapid expansion of the economy following the quadrupling of global oil prices by 1973 also fuelled an import-dependent industrialization strategy. Agriculture which had been the Nigerian economic mainstay was neglected. Massive government expenditure on infrastructure, prestige projects and the rapidly expanding public sector was funded by oil exports.

The industrialization was however limited to light manufacturing and large-scale turn key projects in the petroleum sector, iron and steel and the automobile industry. With little effort invested in heavy industry, research and development, and the diver-

sification of the oil-based economy, the country's fortunes became tied to an "enclave" oil industry. Thus, it was not unexpected that the collapse in global oil prices in the late 1970s and early 1980s sent the Nigerian economy into a tailspin.

The global economic recession was sharply refracted into Nigeria, leading to a deep-seated economic crisis. By the mid-1980s, the post-war oil-boom that had buoyed massive government expenditure, consumption and profligacy, had effectively come to an end, forcing the government to seek an economic rescue package from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. In 1986, in spite of public rejection, the government signed and adopted an IMF/World Bank market-based economic reform package – the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP). Within five years, the deleterious social consequences of SAP had become obvious, as the living conditions of the vulnerable groups in society were severely impoverished and traumatized by the market-based "shock therapy" of the Bretton Woods institutions, which was further compounded by military repression and misrule, whose effects were felt throughout the country, but particularly in the Niger Delta where the exploitation of oil was intensified.

It was in the context of the socio-economic crisis partly occasioned by the collapse of the external oil sector, prolonged misrule and the continued neglect of the Niger Delta by the government-oil companies' partnership that the spirit of resistance in the region was revived. Ken Saro-Wiwa, a writer, activist, businessman and environmentalist founded a grass-root movement in early the 1990s called "Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People" (MOSOP). MOSOP campaigns as a grass-root organization demanded local autonomy for the Ogoni people, and Ogoniland. There was also a call for the recognition of the economic contributions of Ogoni to the Nigerian State, and restitution for poverty in Ogoni as well as the ecological damage to Ogoniland by oil and mining activities. MOSOP also protested the marginalization of the Ogoni and her people at the federal and state levels demanding equal citizenship rights as other groups in Nigeria (Ken Saro-Wiwa, 1992, 1995; Ike Okonta, 2008; Ike Okonta and Oronto Douglas, 2001; CLO, 2002).¹ The Ogoni demands are contained in the "Ogoni Bill of Rights", presented by MOSOP to the Nigerian government in 1990. The demands contained in the Bill of Rights were ignored by the federal military government.

MOSOP, under the leadership of the charismatic writer and Ogoni ethnic minority rights activist, Ken Saro-Wiwa, targeted and successfully stopped Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC) and all oil activities in the whole of Ogoniland through peaceful non-violent mass action in 1993. However, the Nigerian state under the authoritarian military regime led by General Sani Abacha repressed the Ogoni campaign using military force. Many MOSOP cadres and Ogoni people suffered from the military campaigns against the Ogoni, and some fled into exile or went underground. This culminated in the arrest, torture, detention, trial and the widely condemned execution by hanging of Ken Saro-Wiwa along with eight leaders of MOSOP on November 10, 1995 on the orders of a special tribunal and sanctioned by the military ruling council

1. Ogoni is an ethnic nationality of about 500,000 people, in Tai, Khana, Gokana and Eleme LGAs of Rivers State. Shell Petroleum Development company started oil exploration in the 1960s in this region of the Niger Delta.

(Human Rights Watch, 1999; CLO, 2001).¹ In his last address to the special tribunal, Ken Saro-Wiwa predicted that the struggle would continue, and sounded a wake-up call to the ethnic nationalities of the delta and beyond (Ike Okonta and Orono Douglas, 2001). In his words:

...whether the peaceful ways favored will prevail depends on what the oppressor decides, what signals it sends out to the waiting public...I call upon the Ogoni people, the peoples of the Niger Delta, and the oppressed minorities of Nigeria to stand up now and fight fearlessly and peacefully for their rights.

After the hanging of Ken Saro-Wiwa and some members of MOSOP's leadership, other ethnic minority resistance movements emerged in the Niger Delta. These included: Movement for the Survival of the Ijaw Ethnic Nationality in the Niger Delta (MOSIEND), Movement for Reparation to Ogbia (MORETO), the Chikoko Movement, the Oron National Forum, Egi Peoples Coalition, Ikwere Youth Convention, the Ijaw Youth Council amongst others. All these ethnic movements favored the non-violent approach adopted by MOSOP.

The Nigeria government backed by oil corporations, however, did not accede to the demands of these groups. The militarization of the Niger Delta region and the repression of the non-violent protests that followed, left trails of "sorrow, tears, blood" anguish and death. The heavy toll in terms of human rights abuses in the region worsened matters. In some cases, entire oil-bearing communities were razed to the ground after the military were informed by oil companies that protesting communities were threatening oil facilities or staff (Courson, 2006, 2007). As Anna Zalik (2004) noted, the Niger Delta is a "region that has been marked by a history of state and petroleum industry collusion both in social repression and environmental destruction". For his part, Watts (2004) has described the Niger Delta region as being embroiled in "petro-violence".

Apart from its repression of the IYC-led protests in December 1998, the military turned its attention to other oil-bearing communities of the delta including those in the Ijaw axis (Yenagoa, Mbiama, Bomadi, Kaiama). Partly in response to the excesses of the military forces in the region, the realignment of political forces in the run up to Nigeria's return to democratic rule in 1999, and the view that non-violent protests were not achieving any substantial result, some irrepressible pressure groups emerged in various parts of Ijaw territories. The militarization of the region had begun to gradually elicit a response in the shift in local resistance from a non-violent to a violent form. The new groups included MOSIEND, Egbesu Boys of Africa (EBA), Supreme Egbesu Assembly (SEA), The Atangbala Boys (TAB), Niger Delta Vigilante (NDV), Niger Delta Peoples Volunteer Force (NDPVF), and Niger Delta Freedom Fighters (NDFF) amongst others. These pressure groups were initially formed with the aim of continuing the struggle for

1. Shell, the major oil company operating in Ogoniland, allegedly procured arms and ammunition, and provided financial and material support for the invading Nigerian military task force that killed or maimed hundreds and destroyed properties in Ogoni (Observer Newspaper, January 28, 1996). The experience of the Ogoni in the hands of the Nigerian military and SPDC is well documented in a report by Human Rights Watch, *The Price of Oil: Corporate Responsibility and Human Rights Violations in Nigeria's Oil Producing Communities*. New York, 1999, www.hrw.org/Nigeria. See also, a report by the Civil Liberties Organization (CLO), *Blood Trail: Repression and Resistance in the Niger Delta*. Lagos: 2002.

the emancipation of the people and the environment of the delta from the firm grip of the Federal Government and the oil multinationals.

However, some of them moved into a violent phase. Thus, the tension in the Niger Delta remained high as Nigeria transitioned from military dictatorship to democratic rule in 1999. The enthronement of democratic rule initially raised hopes that the crisis in the Niger Delta could be resolved democratically. But within a few years such hopes gave way to frustration, anger and the drift towards more violence.

Democratic Repression and Its Discontents

The end of military rule and emergence of civil rule in Nigeria in May 1999 was meant to be a new start for good and responsive governance. The election of President Olusegun Obasanjo in 1999 ended decades of military dictatorship, and was expected to open up the democratic space to enable Nigerians to participate in the governance of their country. To the disappointment of many, political corruption, cronyism and electoral fraud undermined Nigeria's post-military democracy.

In the Niger Delta, the return to democracy raised hopes that justice and equity would be delivered with regard to the Niger Delta question. These hopes were partly based on discussions between the President-elect and various ethnic nationalities of the Niger Delta with a view to addressing their grievances.

However, within his first year in office President Olusegun Obasanjo deployed more troops to some troubled spots in the Niger Delta.¹ Barely six months into the democratic dispensation, to be precise, on November 20, 1999, Odi, an oil-bearing community in Bayelsa State was razed to the ground by troops ordered in by the President. According to some estimates, about 2,483 persons (mainly women and children), lost their lives.² The invasion and massacre was attributed to the need to arrest a certain youth gang accused of murdering nine police officers in the community. But five days later, Major General T.Y. Danjuma, then Minister of Defense revealed to the public that the action was taken to protect oil installations in the territory.³ Femi Fani-Kayode, an aide of President Olusegun Obasanjo, while justifying the military onslaught on communities in the Niger Delta stated as follows:

...when we need to be hard, we have been very hard. We were very tough when it came to Odi town where our policemen and our people were killed by these ethnic militants. And the federal government went in and literally leveled the whole place. And the proof of the pudding is in the eating. It has never happened again since that time. So, I think that policy works.⁴

1. Due to the creation, location and re-location of some Local Government Areas by the Abacha regime there had been clashes between Ijaws in Ondo State and their Ilaje neighbors. In the same vein there has been no love lost between the Ijaws of Gbaramatu in Delta State and their Itsekiri neighbors over the location, re-location of Warri South LGA from Ogbe-Ijoh an Ijaw community to Ogidigben an Itsekiri community.

2. Environmental Rights Action/Friends of the Earth, 2002, p. 2. See also, Human Rights Watch Report, December, 2000.

3. *Ibid.*

4. Femi Fani-Kayode quoted in "Swamps of Insurgency: Nigeria's Delta Unrest", *Africa Report*, No. 115, August 2006, p. 7.

It can be deduced that the policy of the government was partly informed by the resort to the military option in dealing with oil producing communities seen to be protesting against oil companies or suspected of harboring militants. In this regard, the Odi invasion was followed by others in Odioma (2005) and Agge (2008) communities.

The federal government officially drafted a Joint Task Force (JTF) made up of the three arms of the military and security services, under a military campaign code named "Operation Restore Hope" to curb the restiveness in the oil-rich Niger Delta region. Its mandate among others was to secure oil installations, curb oil community agitation and neutralize any threat to the oil industry.¹

The 2003 elections in Nigeria were another turning point in the history of the Niger Delta insurgency. Some of the militias in the region were armed and used by political power elites and office seekers against real and perceived opponents. As a result, scores of politicians and people were intimidated, maimed or killed before and during the elections.² Youth groups backed by those in power and loyal to politicians were armed and used to rig the elections, while some oil corporations reportedly aided the effort.³ Such youth groups also operated with impunity and recklessly in collaboration with compromised agents of the state to ensure the victory of the ruling party (PDP). The Environmental Rights Action, a local non-profit organization, described the 2003 elections as "a low intensity armed struggle".⁴

The use of violence during elections also contributed to the acquisition and use of sophisticated weapons and firearms in various parts of the delta and even beyond setting the pace for a post-election armed resistance struggle in the Niger Delta. This is where greed rather than grievance crept into the conflict dynamics in the region. The youth gangs fell to the lure of political office holders and politicians due to the easy cash flow and state protection they received.

The Nigerian political space is dominated by corrupt, greedy and desperate elites who will stop at nothing just to acquire political power. Corruption has been institutionalized by the ruling elites in Nigeria; hence political leaders embezzle most of the money accruing from the sale of oil. A former anti-corruption czar in Nigeria, Mr. Nuhu Ribadu while granting an interview to the BBC in 2006 said, "more than \$380bn has either been stolen or wasted by Nigerian governments since independence in 1960".⁵ He says when you fight corruption in Nigeria it fights you back, and posits that unless the problem of corruption is frontally addressed, Nigeria may not reach her desired destination due to greed by her political and ruling elites.

1. The military Joint Task Force (JTF) is a combined security outfit comprising the army, navy, air-force, mobile police and the state security service, whose major duty is to repress uprisings (peaceful or violent) in oil producing communities of the Niger Delta. Many saw the creation of a special military task force for the Niger Delta as unjust and oppressive because there was the OPC uprising in the West, MASSOB agitating for a sovereign State in the East and constant religious riots in the North of Nigeria.

2. For instance, Bola Ige the Minister of Justice and chief law officer of the nation was killed in his home, Marshall Harry, a former South-South coordinator of the ruling PDP who defected to another party was assassinated in his home in Abuja, Ogbonnaya Uche and Theodore Agwatu were also assassinated in Imo State.

3. Ijaw Council for Human Rights Report, 2002; see also, Human Rights Watch, April 2003.

4. Environmental Rights Action/Friends of the Earth, April 2003.

5. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/6069230.stm>

Alhaji Dokubo-Asari who had worked closely with the government of Rivers State before and during the election, reportedly fell out with his erstwhile patron, then Governor Peter Odili of Rivers State for criticizing the conduct of the elections as fraudulent and unacceptable to the Ijaws.¹ This incident later degenerated into a bloody conflict between Dokubo-Asari's Niger Delta Peoples Volunteer Force (NDPVF) on the one hand, and the security agencies and Ateke Tom's Niger Delta Vigilante (NDV) on the other.²

The attack and counter-attack by these two groups left scores dead and property worth millions destroyed. Alhaji Dokubo-Asari changed tactics from attacking the military to attacking oil installations in the creeks of the Niger Delta. His strategy of attacking the soft underbelly of the Nigerian economy rather than the military (oil installations) adversely affected the international oil market, leading to increases in the price of oil whenever such attacks resulted in the shut-in of oil production, and reduced oil exports.

However, peace was restored between Dokubo-Asari and Ateke through the intervention of some youths in the region, and negotiations in the federal capital city Abuja, after which both men agreed to lay down their arms, and the federal government granted the militants amnesty. Although the violent conflict subsided, other political struggles continued. Some such struggles involved members of the Niger Delta ruling elite and their federal counterparts. At the heart of such fractional struggles was the question of power within the PDP as the party began early preparations for the 2007 elections. In September 2005, Ebitimi Banigo an Ijaw businessman was arrested and his bank basically shut down by the authorities citing certain technicalities. At the same time, D.S.P Alamieseigha the governor of Bayelsa state (the only wholly Ijaw state) was arrested in far away London on money laundering charges. Also, Dokubo-Asari the NDPVF leader was arrested in the government house in Port Harcourt on September 20 and taken to Abuja, where he was later charged with treason in relation to his campaign for resource control and the holding of a sovereign national conference. These events increased tensions and restiveness in the Niger Delta as the Ijaw felt that some of their leaders were being unfairly targeted by the federal government. Such feelings were further fed by the perceptions of the JTF as an "army of occupation" in the Niger Delta.

The arrest and detention of Dokubo-Asari and Alamieseigha among other things created conditions for the escalation of tensions in the Niger Delta, and the emergence of some radical tendencies within the Ijaw movement based on the feeling that the non-violent path to the struggle for resource control had failed to get the federal government and oil companies to change their attitude towards the plight of the people of the Niger Delta. This was the background to the coming together of various militias and armed groups in the region leading to the emergence of MEND.

1. Alhaji Dokubo-Asari was the first national Vice-President of the IYC, and later became the President in controversial circumstances. He is also the leader of Niger Delta Peoples Volunteer Force and the first militia leader whose group NDPVF officially carried arms against the Nigerian state after the Kaiama declaration. This was the period he was said to be patronized by the Governor of Rivers State and other political leaders in Rivers State. The Rivers State then commissioner for information, Mr. Magnus Abe, while talking with the international Crisis Group conceded the close relationship when he said "Asari worked with us before the 2003 elections".

2. It is believed in some quarters that Ateke Tom's group was funded by the government and security agents to launch military campaigns and contain the excesses of Dokubo-Asari in the state.

MEND Insurgency: The Local- Global Dimension

*We cannot continue to consume the world's resources without regard to effect.*¹

President Barack Obama

In November and December of 2005, two explosives were detonated in the creeks of Rivers State, destroying two Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC) pipelines located in Okirika and Andoni axis with no person or group(s) claiming responsibility. On January 11, 2006 an SPDC oil-field located about 20km offshore was attacked, damaged and four expatriates abducted by militants after a fierce gun duel with the military guarding the oil-field.² The dust had barely settled when on Sunday January 15, 2006, MEND militants “attacked and destroyed one flow station and two military house-boats belonging to SPDC in Benisede, Bayelsa State”.³

MEND's objective, according to the spokesperson of MEND Jomo Gbomo “is to totally destroy the capacity of the Nigerian government to export oil”.⁴ These attacks and shut-in of 400,000 bpd led to hike in the price of oil on the international market. Commenting on the strategy Boyloaf, then MEND Commander, explained that it was based on targeting oil facilities rather than the military.⁵ In his words:

I believe the economy is the power. Like you may have known, I don't believe in fighting human beings, I believe in crumbling the economy. On my way crumbling (sic) the economy, if any military man comes across me and tries to stop me, I mean those people will kiss their graves. My bullet, nozzle is always targeted at the flow stations, pipelines etc, I don't believe in fighting human beings. Before we formed the MEND, our people were fighting, but it was a war between the Ijaw and Itsekiri, that was not the Niger Delta struggle.

Sensing that the disruption of the oil flow from the Niger Delta to the global market would have a most potent and devastating effect on the federal government, oil companies and international community, the MEND militants withdrew from the cities of the Niger Delta and went into the maze of creeks. The attacks on the infrastructure of

1. Barack Obama, Inaugural Speech in Washington DC as President of USA on 20 January 2009.

2. Jomo Gbomo, the official spokesman of MEND in an email sent to the media attributed the attack and previous attacks of November and December to MEND militants in the creeks of the Niger Delta. Jomo claimed that scores of Nigerian military men were killed in the various encounters and warned oil workers and the military to vacate the Niger Delta territory or face the wrath of the militants. SPDC and all other oil companies were also advised to suspend their operations in the area due to their connivance with the government in the impoverishment of the people. The four expatriates taken into custody by the MEND militants were: Patrick Arnold (USA), Nichev Miliko (Bulgaria), Nigel Watson (UK) and Harry Ebanks (Honduras). The ‘guests’ were released to the government at the end of January unharmed. The militants demanded the immediate and unconditional release of Dokubo-Asari, Governor, D.S.P Alamiyeseigha (arrested in London but arrived in Nigeria mysteriously) and the withdrawal of SPDC from the territory.

3. Jomo Gbomo, the official spokesman of MEND in a press statement sent to the media and public after the attack and destruction of the Benisede and Shell EA flow station in Bayelsa State.

4. Ibid.

5. Boyloaf (Victor Ben Ebikabowei) in an interview with *Sunday Vanguard* on May 25, 2008. Boyloaf has since been expelled from his position as the Commander of the Bayelsa state chapter of MEND after he along with thirty one militants on August 7, 2009 accepted the amnesty proclaimed by the Nigerian federal government on June 25, for Niger Delta militants that agree to lay down their arms.

the oil industry, particularly oil production and oil export had the effect of cutting oil production and pushing up the price of oil in the tight and nervous global market.

MEND as a group/movement has no clear leadership structure. The only known face of MEND is its anonymous or veiled spokesperson Jomo Gbomo, who is known only through press statements distributed to the media. The movement is a loose coalition of shadowy groups (cells) and a variety of leaders scattered across the states of the Niger Delta, who sometimes are unaware of events undertaken by other cells until such events are publicized. The decision not to have a single command structure but a diverse and amorphous leadership is to make the movement elusive, but effective in guerilla warfare extending over the whole region. This is a strategy aimed at avoiding the fate in earlier movements in the region with a visible leadership such as MOSOP, NDPVF, and EBA etc, whose leadership/top hierarchy was easily targeted for elimination, or compromised by the oil companies and the government. This “invisible” nature of MEND is an important factor making it difficult for the government, oil companies and even the military to target the organization and effectively neutralize its activities in the troubled Niger Delta.

This use of local force to block the global oil trade has been significant in two ways: on the one hand, it has led to more global attention being focused on the situation in the oil producing communities in the region, particularly the plight and demands of the people, while on the other it has raised the energy security stakes of the world’s established and emerging powers in the region. MEND has tapped fully into acts likely to draw global attention to the Niger Delta: the taking of western nationals as hostages and the shut-ins resulting from oil facility destruction that contribute to the higher price of crude oil. These acts have been connected to a sophisticated strategy for engaging global media through the use of IT, and drawing the attention of intervention agencies to the crisis and plight of the people in the region.

The JTF has always stated that MEND and other militia groups in the region are criminals and miscreants who have over the years been involved in illegal oil theft and other illegal activities and must be removed for the free flow of oil. This view resonates in a leaked military report by the then commander of the Joint Task Force in the Niger Delta (2006-2008), former Brig. Gen. L.P. Ngubane (as he then was), entitled “Brief for Chief of Defence Staff on Strategies to Stem out Militant Activities within the Joint Task Force Operation Restore Hope Area of Responsibility”.¹ The report was reportedly intercepted by the militants and released to the media.

In the report organizations such as MOSOP, INC, IYC, NDPVF and FNDIC are tagged as militant groups that must be crushed. The document highlights militant leaders in the region and estimates their capabilities, weaponry and manpower. Marked for total annihilation are Ijaw communities such as Oporoza, Kurutie, Kunukunuma, Okerenkoko and other villages in Gbaramatu clan, Delta State, seen as incubators of militia activity. The report also identifies Ijaw communities in Bayelsa and Rivers States that should also be covered by the military campaign against Niger Delta insurgents. It was very clear that maximum military force rather than political action was required

1. The Joint Task Force Report was posted on www.saharareporters.com in May 2009 during the military invasion of Gbaramatu Kingdom.

by the federal government to stamp out militancy using coordinated military counter-insurgency tactics and operations. The military posits that the resolution of the crisis lies in maximum military expenditure in the region even though it will result in innocent lives lost.¹

In tandem with the militarized approach to enforcing security in the region, the Nigerian government and the oil corporations with some logistical support from some foreign countries, have deployed more troops into the creeks to neutralize the “militants”.² The government on its part has described the Niger Delta militants as criminals, just as some international analysts have tagged them “terrorists” that threaten legitimate oil commerce, property and human lives.

The result has been an increase in the use of the state security and coercive apparatus in the attempt to discredit and crush MEND. The Governors of the Niger Delta have been supportive of the approach adopted by the federal government and oil companies. Hence the Governments of Bayelsa, Delta and Rivers contribute about two hundred and fifty million naira each monthly to the sustenance of the security outfit in the region.³ The MEND militants view most of the Niger Delta Governors as external impositions on the region and are in a state of constant friction with these Governors. The Governors on their part have also internally devised the strategy of financial inducement as pay-offs to “cooperative” factional leaders/commanders or militants located in their territories in order to get the desired peace.⁴

On its part, MEND has alleged that the military deployment to the creeks has mainly led to human rights abuses, harassment, rape, the sacking of communities, and death of innocent citizens, often without provocation.⁵ Shadi Bushra, writing in the Stanford Progressive observes that:⁶

...the overarching theme of this and similar resistance efforts, the liberation of a land occupied by an irresponsible foreign goliath cannot be dismissed as “terrorism”. It is this oversimplification that forces people into arms. Whenever we regard the pain of others, regardless of how many borders or oceans are between us, with indifference, we open the door for such violent groups. We invite them into a world which doesn't recognize a shared purpose, but instead chooses to reward those who recklessly pursue power and wealth. Without addressing the problems we have all helped fashion, we have all but invited such extremism into our shared world.

1. The JTF Report posted on www.saharareporters.com

2. The US government gave the Nigerian military two gunboats to contain the militants; Mark Taylor of the State Department confirmed this to the author during his visit to the delta in 2003. The US navy has since intensified its presence in the Gulf of Guinea. In the Vanguard Newspaper of July 7, France and Britain have also promised to support the government and oil companies militarily. Due to the unrest most western countries placed travel warnings directing their nationals to stay clear of the delta (http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis_pa_tw/tw/tw_928.html)

3. This information was provided during an interview with a top government functionary in the Delta State government in September 2006.

4. This information was given during the author's field work in militant camps in June 2006.

5. Jomo Gbomo in an email to the media. See also, Amnesty International Report, November 2006.

6. Shadi Bushra, “Nigeria Wages War for Its Own Oil”, *The Stanford Progressive*, January 2009 edition, ‘A Different Race: A New Approach to Old Problem’, www.campusprogress.org

On February 15, 2006, military helicopter gunships were deployed hovering around the Okerenkoko (an Ijaw territory, termed stronghold of MEND militants in military circles) and its surrounding villages emitting explosives from above and shooting indiscriminately into communities. The action was replayed on the 17 and 18 February 2006. The three days aerial bombardment and shooting reportedly led to the destruction of three communities (Perezuoweikorigbene, Ukpogbene and Seitorububor) all in Gbaramatu clan, and left 20 persons dead.¹ The government in its defense said that the Nigerian military was merely attacking and destroying barges used by oil thieves in the area. MEND movement, interpreted the attack by the military as a deliberate targeting for bombardment of the communities seen as sympathetic to its cause.

Thus, it responded swiftly by attacking the Forcados oil export terminal and wreaking havoc on the facility, taking nine expatriate hostages both in retaliation for the attack on Gbaramantu and to stop further attacks on oil communities.² MEND has constantly reminded the public that their action was propelled by the desire for justice and fairness. According to the organization's spokesperson: "We are asking for justice. We want our land, and the Nigerian government to transfer all its involvement in the oil industry to host communities which will become shareholders in these oil companies".³ This demand is consistent both with the historical quest for local autonomy and resource control by the ethnic minorities of the oil producing Niger Delta. What has changed in real terms is the form of protest and resistance, which has entered a violent phase.

In April 20, 2006, MEND extended its attack into the cities in the region by detonating two bombs: one in Port Harcourt (Bori camp military barrack), and the other at a petrol tanker garage in the city of Warri.⁴ The group described the bomb attacks as "symbolic rather than strategic".⁵ Then President, Olusegun Obasanjo who had hitherto been talking tough called for dialogue and created the Council on Social and Economic Development of Coastal States (COSEEDECS) and offered other palliatives to citizens of the delta.⁶ The former President's palliatives appeared not to go far enough and failed to attract the attention of the people and militias.

1. See Oboko Bello interview in *Niger Delta News Magazine*, Lagos, June 2006, pp. 22-26. Jomo Gbomo had warned that "Shell employees will pay a terrible price for the use of Shell facilities in the attack of communities in the Niger Delta".

2. Jomo Gbomo in an email to the media after the attack on Forcados terminal by MEND fighters. The location was chosen as a target to show the oil companies, military and the government that they (MEND) have the capacity and 'facilities' to storm any oil facility in the creeks of the Niger Delta and render it impotent not minding how many military personnel are deployed for its protection. The group also promised to "continue to nibble the Nigeria oil export industry until we think necessary to deal it a final blow. We have caused the oil companies and Nigeria government to pay more for our oil and eventually, it will be snatched right out of their grip".

3. Jomo Gbomo's online message to the media.

4. Jomo Gbomo said "it is a warning to the Nigerian military and the oil companies in the area and a proof that the Nigerian military was incapable of protecting itself, let alone protecting the oil industry".

5. Jomo Gbomo in an email to the media after the bomb blast of April 20, 2006.

6. The Ijaws boycotted the presidential council meeting that led to the creation of COSEEDECS. The decision to boycott the meeting was made public by INC (Ijaw National Congress, the leading Ijaw socio-cultural organization) and Ijaw national leader E.K. Clark. The reason for the boycott was that the Ijaw nation has a particular problem and wanted to discuss with the President as a distinct ethnic nationality in the Niger Delta. However, some Ijaw persons who were termed sell-outs attended the Abuja parley. The President also announced the dualization of the East-West road (the only road linking the delta to other parts of Nigeria), and also directed that youths from the region be absorbed into the armed forces. (This latter directive was seen by many as an attempt to train youths of the region to fight the raging battle with MEND and other militias.)

On August 20, 2006, 15 Ijaw citizens were ambushed and murdered by the military Joint Task Force (JTF) while on their way back from Letugbene.¹ The paradox here is that MEND had facilitated the release of a Shell hostage and was taking him to safety when they were ambushed and killed. The victims were said to be returning from Letugbene after rescuing a Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC) staff member (Ujeya Nelson) kidnapped by the inhabitants of Letugbene over the refusal of SPDC to honor a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) freely entered into with the community over the years. The incident in FNDIC's view was a set-up orchestrated by the military and SPDC, and attributed to the resolve to intervene in the Letugbene saga after due pressures from the Ijaw Interactive Assembly, government functionaries (federal and state), officials of SPDC, Chief of Army staff and the JTF.² The circumstances of the killings had the effect of hardening MEND's resolve to fight on. MEND as an organization may have been polarized or even infiltrated by the government and MNOCs in the region but their operations have extended to all nooks and crannies of the delta making it ubiquitous and elusive to handle by the military.

However, signs that the federal Government was preparing for a showdown with MEND and other militias appeared in early 2007 when then Vice President Atiku Abubakar while commissioning his campaign headquarters in Abuja on January 30 2007, revealed to the public that the "administration of President Olusegun Obasanjo, a few weeks ago, just approved \$2 billion to buy weapons to fight the militants in the Niger Delta". The militants responded saying, "we are prepared for war".³ The Presidency then subsequently denied the claim by the Vice President Atiku Abubakar.

After his failed bid for a third term, President Olusegun Obasanjo stepped down from office. Following the rather controversial 2007 Nigerian general elections, President Umaru Musa Yar' Adua and Goodluck Jonathan (Vice President) came to power. The elections were marred by fraud and irregularities and were condemned by international observers and local monitors for not meeting democratic requirements nationally and internationally.⁴ Unlike Olusegun Obasanjo, the new President met two of MEND's conditions in 2007: Alhaji Dokubo-Asari and D.S.P Alamieyeseigha were released from prison. While Dokubo-Asari was granted bail on health grounds, Alamieyeseigha pleaded guilty to charges of corruption and was freed after serving his prison term.

Henry Okah, a MEND leader agreed to participate in the dialogue process initially supported the formation of the Niger Delta Peace and Conflict Resolution Committee (NDPCRC), and nominated its chairman and secretary after a meeting with the Nigerian Vice President in 2007.⁵ But a few months later, Henry Okah was arrested in Angola for gun-running and extradited to Nigeria and charged with treason and other related

1. FNDIC press statement delivered at Warri Central Hospital on September 2, 2006 by Dr. Oboko Bello during the burial ceremony of nine of the 15 men killed by JTF.

2. *Ibid.*

3. *Vanguard Newspaper*, Lagos February 1, 2007.

4. For the atrocities of the 2007 elections see International Crisis Group Reports, March 28, 2007, and May 30, 2007; see also, Human Right Watch Report, March 2008 (Cited in EU Election Observers Report: Nigeria 2007).

5. See Ijaw Youth Leadership Forum, *Press Release* "The Niger Delta Peace Process: A Critical Review", December 14, 2007.

offences. His incarceration and trial by the Nigerian government further jeopardized the peace process in the region leading to the declaration of armed campaigns (Hurricane Barbarosa and Hurricane Obama) in the region by MEND and other groups calling for his immediate and unconditional release. MEND's operations spanned the various states of the region, but took place mainly in Rivers, Bayelsa and Delta States. Also, offshore oil facilities that were regarded as safe havens from militants' attacks have come under attack. On June 20, 2008, the SPDC operated Bonga oil platform (the largest offshore oil platform in the Niger Delta) located 120km offshore was attacked by MEND fighters.¹ The attack underscored the sophistication of MEND fighters and showed that oil platforms/facilities (onshore or offshore) were within the reach of MEND fighters.

The signals of coercion in the region became evident when Nigeria's new President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua presented the 2008 budget to the National Assembly in December 2007. In the budget to the National Assembly the government allocated the sum of sixty-nine billion naira to the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) for the development of the Niger Delta region, while the sum of four hundred and forty-four billion naira was allocated to security in the Niger Delta. Leaders, elders, activists and militia groups in the region condemned this action of the government saying it was a tactical declaration of war in the region by the federal government of Nigeria.

In the first half of 2009, the securitization of the Niger Delta in the form of increased deployment of military force became more apparent. Government stepped up its military action in the region in May 2009. After two days (May 13 and 14) of ground fighting between the Military Joint Task Force and militants in the Gbaramatu axis of the western part of Delta State, the military deployed four jet fighters, twenty-four gun boats and three battalions of the Nigerian army into the area. The JTF attributed the renewed hostility on the militants' base to the killing of eighteen military officers guarding oil facilities by fighters loyal to a militia leader Government Ekpemupolo (Tompolo). On their part, the militants insist that the military attack on their base was unprovoked, but rather was a calculated attempt by the military to drag them into a pre-planned military battle for control of the oil industry in the region.² Camp 5 a suspected stronghold of the Tompolo-led militia was attacked by the military using jet fighter and bombs and aided by ground troops and naval support. The bomb attack was extended to Oporoza, the headquarters of the Gbaramatu Kingdom where a cultural festival attended by indigenes and visitors was ongoing.

In Oporoza, the community's guesthouse, the king's palace and several buildings were attacked, with scores of people either wounded or killed. The military cordoned off the waterways and creeks then raided suspected militants' camps in the territory. The military attack was extended to several communities in the area such as Kurutie, Benikurukuru, Kunukunuma, Okerenkoko, Goba, Abiteye (Kiangbene) etc.³ The military air, land and sea attack on communities left several persons dead (mainly children, women

1. Jomo Gbomo in an email to the media on the 20 June 2008.

2. Emma Amaize, *Vanguard Newspaper*, Lagos, 24 May 2009. See also Dokubo-Asari's interview, *Vanguard Newspaper*, Lagos, 24 May 2009. See Oboko Bello, 'Task Force Acted on False Intelligence', *The Nation Newspaper*, Lagos, 26 May 2009.

3. Telephone conversation with Paul Bebenimibo, a Gbaramatu youth leader on 5 August 2009.

and the elderly) and several others missing (the missing cannot be ascertained because the region remains cordoned off by the JTF); Oboko Bello, a community leader in the kingdom put the figure of missing and dead tentatively at between 500 and 2,000.¹

The militants on the other hand, declared “Hurricane Piper Alpha” which was later upgraded to “Hurricane Moses” which targeted oil facilities in the territory and beyond by blowing up pipelines, flow-stations and oil facilities with the intent of crumbling the oil economy.² These attacks reduced the oil output from 2.6 million bpd to 1.8 million bpd within a month of renewed militia attacks on oil facilities.³ Under pressure from the international community and mindful of the tense security situation in the region, the government in June entered into dialogue with various stakeholders and groups in the region to explore ways for ending the conflict and restoring order in the Niger Delta. These consultations were followed by the announcement by the federal government of an amnesty to militants willing to lay down their arms and be ready to be re-integrated into society. This, along with the dropping of charges against, and release of Henry Okah from prison contributed to the declaration of a ceasefire by MEND. It however criticized the amnesty as announced by the government as superficial as it did not address the core/fundamental issues at the root of the violent agitations in the region. MEND militants’ declaration of a 60-day ceasefire was largely due to the release of its leader Henry Okah by the government in accordance with one of its key demands.

Analyzing the emergence of MEND and its modus operandi, Shadi Bushra observes that the organization was a child of necessity because “all manners of peacefully resisting the environmental, social, and economic degradation of their country at the hands of the oil companies have proven to be futile. As such, their only recourse has been the violent and mutually unbeneficial “war on oil companies”.⁴ Shadi further noted that MEND’s activities “may have led to the loss of lives, destruction of oil facilities, kidnap of foreign nationals and instability in the region, but their ultimate aim is to free the Niger Delta and its people from the vicious grip of the MNOCs and a corrupt and irresponsible government”.⁵

MEND’s emergence has redefined the socio-economic space and political ecology of the Niger Delta and Nigeria as a whole. By resorting to armed struggle, the organization has tapped into the local-global dimension of the quest for resource control in the Niger Delta. It has also sought to move the effort for resolving the conflict outside of the exclusive sphere of the Nigerian state, which it perceives as being unable to be an honest broker – due to its own vested interests in the exclusive control of oil and its role as the partner of oil multinationals exploiting the oil in the Niger Delta. Thus, MEND has consistently called for international mediation in the conflict. It has also rejected the terrorist and criminal tags, insisting that its struggle is for survival, equity, dignity and justice for the people of the Niger Delta.

1. Murphy Ganagana, *The Sun* Newspaper, 5 June 2009.

2. Emma Amaize, *Vanguard* Newspapers, 10 & 13, 2009.

3. Ayomide Owonibi, *The Nation* Newspaper, Lagos, 28 July 2009.

4. Shadi Bushra, “Nigeria Wages War for Its Own Oil” in *The Stanford Progressive*, January 2009 edition, ‘A Different Race: A New Approach to Old Problem, www.campusprogress.org

5. *Ibid.*

From the foregoing, it can be surmised that at the core of the Niger Delta conflict is the struggle for constitutional and legitimate rights, a struggle against poverty, marginalization, political repression, unjust treatment of the region, environmental devastation and the insensitivity of the rulers to the plights of the people. Although there is some ambiguity and complexity built into the conflict, it is basically a struggle for the rights and dignity as well as social justice for the people of the Niger Delta who have paid a high price for hosting a global oil industry. Unless and until these issues are fundamentally and equitably addressed the conflict will continue to fester and may assume more complex or violent forms.

Conclusion

The Niger Delta conflict is the result of a complex mixture of grievance, greed, marginalization, deprivation, political repression and the quest for social equity and justice. Thus, while it may be true that grievance and greed may cause conflict in resource abundant countries, these factors are mixed up with historical factors, external actors and local political dynamics. In Nigeria the indigenes and ethnic minorities of Niger Delta oil producing communities have anchored their resistance on their exclusion from the benefits of the oil industry, resulting in the lack of social development, good governance, widespread poverty and high levels of unemployment in the region in spite of more than fifty years of oil production. The problems are further compounded by the pollution of their lands and waters, with its attendant adverse implications for the health and livelihoods of local people. Resistance has been radicalized both by a generational shift towards a youth “vanguard” and the brutal methods employed in the repression of the people by the government and its security agencies working to protect the international oil companies in the region. Over the years, different groups/ethnic nationalities have emerged with diverse nomenclatures but their demands have remained constant: “resource control and self-determination”.

Thus, the increased securitization and militarization of the region is not likely to result in the resolution of the Niger Delta crisis. The solution does not lie in the deployment of more troops, security advisers or military logistics into the region; rather it lies in reversing the culture of impunity and the lack of accountability on the part of the ruling elites and oil companies to the people of the Niger Delta. It will also require addressing issues of poverty, democratic governance, employment, marginalization and environmental assault.

As has been shown, the resort to the military option has over the years not only aggravated the problem, but has also made the military part of the problem. It is now time for the government, international community and multinational oil companies to jettison coercive/violent methods in favor of a non-violent, participatory resolution of the conflict. Whether the new amnesty for Niger Delta militants being administered through the Presidential Panel on Amnesty and Disarmament of Militants set up on May 5, 2009, will succeed in reining in the spiral of insurgency and insecurity in the Niger Delta beyond the 60 day window of opportunity which ends on October 4, 2009, and set the stage for dismantling armed local resistance and building sustainable peace in the region remains to be seen.

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THIS DISCUSSION PAPER addresses the linkages between the political economy of oil and violent conflict in Nigeria's main oil and gas producing region, the Niger Delta. It is based on a case study of the insurgent Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), which has targeted and attacked the interests of international oil companies and the federal government in the oil-rich, but impoverished, Niger Delta region of Nigeria, in its professed campaign for the control of the oil wealth of the region for the benefit of local people. Through this study of MEND, fresh perspectives are brought to bear on the causes and ramifications of the oil conflict in the region, and the role of various actors at the local, national and international levels. This is important in grasping the nature of the violence in the Niger Delta and Nigeria and the enormity of the task of resolving the complex conflict in which the region is immersed. It is a challenge, which as the author argues, transcends the resort to the militarized or securitized solutions that often fail to adequately address the roots of conflict.

Mr. **ELIAS COURSON** is a lecturer with the Department of Philosophy, Niger Delta University, Nigeria. A trained mediator, he is also an executive committee member of Our Niger Delta (OND), a non-profit, non-governmental organization in Nigeria's oil-rich Niger Delta. He is currently a Rotary World Peace Fellow (2008-2010) at the University of California, Berkeley, USA.

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