



SPECIAL REPORT

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ABOUT THE REPORT

Nigeria's restive Niger Delta region has stayed relatively calm for four years, but how stable is the peace? Based on interviews with a wide range of stakeholders, this report assesses the 2009 federal amnesty program for local militants, a central part of the Nigerian government's security policy in the region. It also analyzes possible future conflict triggers and trends for the delta. The report finds that there is limited consensus on the prospect and scope of future violence in Nigeria, particularly with regard to the upcoming 2015 presidential elections. The report is part of the United States Institute of Peace's long-standing support for conflict analysis and resolution initiatives in the Niger Delta.

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What's Next for Security in the Niger Delta?

Summary

- The Niger Delta has now enjoyed four years of relative calm. However, there is a significant chance the region could see renewed violent conflict in the next one to two years.
- Dividends from a 2009 amnesty for local militants are real and substantial. They include dramatically improved oil production and revenues, fewer deaths and kidnappings, more relaxed travel restrictions, better elections, and job placement for some ex-fighters.
- Critics of the amnesty claim the program fails to treat the root causes of conflict, is corrupt and unsustainable, and promotes warlordism and the spread of organized crime, among other things. These criticisms are not without basis, but they often lack context and balance.
- Major conflict drivers in the delta are still in place, and no long-term peace plan exists. The coming period likely will bring strong flash points and triggers, particularly around the 2015 presidential and gubernatorial elections.
- Wavering leadership on security, the closedown of the amnesty program in 2015, decreased support for President Goodluck Jonathan's candidacy, and close electoral results could all lead to violence in the delta.
- It is possible nonetheless that the election season will pass without a major, prolonged return to violence in the Niger Delta. Nigeria's fractured opposition parties may fail to produce a consensus candidate, and the delta is likely to vote overwhelmingly for President Jonathan.
- The role played by distributions of oil wealth is a particular wild card. It is also still very much unclear how far conflict around the 2015 elections will reflect deeper sociopolitical divisions in Nigeria, or how deep such divisions run.
- This report finds only limited consensus on how any future violence will look. A majority of sources agreed only on a few likely trends—for instance, an increase in kidnappings and the spread of armed attacks outside the Niger Delta.

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Introduction

Nigeria's restive delta region has stayed relatively calm for four years. In that time, many politicians, law enforcement officers, donors, reporters, and analysts have shifted their sights north to focus on Islamist militancy. The crisis conditions that once prevailed in the oil-producing south can seem distant. One international oil company (IOC) recently moved some of its Abuja-based staff to the delta, reversing the trend of the 2000s.

But how stable is the peace in the Niger Delta? Privately, some stakeholders say little has changed for the better since the government offered militants amnesty in June 2009. They argue that the resulting peace is little more than a fragile, purchased cease-fire; that the Jonathan administration has no greater plan for regional security; that future oil and nonoil investments are at risk; that the coming period will see a return to crisis; and that some indices of crisis—kidnappings, for example—are already climbing. At the same time, early warning signs are weak, and predictions of a return to conflict have repeatedly fallen flat. Some tensions in the region genuinely have eased, and press coverage of the amnesty program has been reductive, partisan, and sensationalist.

This report will consider the question: What is next for security in the Niger Delta? It will attempt to place the amnesty in a broader context and analyze possible future conflict triggers and trends. Findings are based primarily on interviews with community members, local elites, ex-combatants, oil company staff and contractors, military officers, media and civil society personnel, members of the diplomatic corps, and Nigerian government officials.

The Amnesty

The federal amnesty program for Niger Delta militants has been remarkably durable. Most observers thought the cease-fire that followed President Umaru Yar'Adua's (2007–10) proclamation of unconditional amnesty on June 25, 2009, would be brief and dirty. The enticements offered to fighters—a \$420 monthly stipend and promises of job training and placement—were somewhat attractive. But to many, the initial rollout looked too crude and compromised to reverse the cycle of grievance, disorder, and political profiteering that had kept the Niger Delta violent for years. Previous peace accords had collapsed within months.

There has been no rigorous assessment of the amnesty program's successes and failures to date, and this report passes no final judgment. The necessary data are absent: No outside body has tracked outcomes over the past four years, and the Presidential Amnesty Office, which administers the program, is still developing its own monitoring and evaluation tools. Furthermore, success would be hard to measure, given that the government never articulated clear goals for the amnesty. The Jonathan administration has also struggled at times to communicate its achievements, whether on the Niger Delta or more broadly.

Successes

The above notwithstanding, gains from the amnesty have been real and substantial. Most notably, the program helped cut armed attacks on oil installations to almost zero. Between 2007 and 2009, government records show such attacks shut down nearly half of Nigeria's 2,000-plus oil fields and deferred billions of dollars in revenues—perhaps \$24 billion in the first months of 2008 alone, according to one government panel.¹ Oil production, which at some points in 2009 may have dipped briefly below one million barrels per day, returned to preinsurgency levels. Savings to Nigeria cannot be calculated with precision, but Niger Delta Special Adviser and Amnesty Program Chair Kingsley Kuku has estimated that the country and its IOC partners earned an extra N6.3 trillion (\$39.3 billion) in 2012 alone.

In addition to the oil sector rebound, anecdotal evidence suggests kidnappings, particularly of expatriates, fell sharply in late 2009. Conflict-related deaths likely dropped, though no good data exist. Nonoil investors began showing fresh interest in the delta, private security protocols relaxed, and foreign government staff visited the region again. In 2011, the amnesty likely contributed to improved elections in the core Niger Delta states (Rivers, Bayelsa, Delta, Akwa-Ibom), as violent actors were paid to sit on the sidelines rather than intimidate voters, steal ballot boxes, or assassinate the opposition as they had during past polls.

The amnesty program's most ambitious goal—job placement for participants—has had demonstrable, if somewhat limited, success. Thus far, the Amnesty Office says it has placed roughly 40 percent of its thirty thousand charges into education and skills training programs. More than five thousand ex-fighters traveled abroad to the United States, United Arab Emirates, South Korea, South Africa, and Ghana, among other places, and more are being processed for deployment. Most recently, plans were announced to train over two hundred participants as pilots in Greece, Saudi Arabia, Dubai, Jordan, and Nigeria. Presidency officials argue, with some justification, that the amnesty could be a prototype for Niger Delta human capital development. The program does seem to be outperforming older, more moribund government job-training programs. At the same time, ex-combatants were allowed to choose their own trades with no strong guidance, and progress linking graduates with employers has been slow. Amnesty Office officials said in late 2012 that perhaps one hundred to two hundred ex-combatants have found long-term work in maritime services, fabrication, and related fields.

Other public and private initiatives complemented the amnesty. A few Niger Delta governors stepped up their performance on capital projects, delivering tangible benefits to some conflict-affected communities for the first time in years. IOCs put more effort into community relations and conflict management, particularly through their global memorandum of understanding (GMOU) programs. Special police operations targeted kidnapping and other violent crime, and government expanded the mandate and shook up the leadership of the military Joint Task Force (JTF) patrolling the area.

Early History

Despite all of these accomplishments, the amnesty has drawn strong criticisms. Many of these are both broadly fair and lacking in context. For example, media stories have depicted the program's focus on offering cash and other benefits to militants as cynical, short-sighted, and unsustainable.² But the amnesty's design cannot be understood apart from its chaotic early history. An isolated, somewhat surprising event—the May 2009 military strike on the camp of militant leader Government Ekpemupolo (Tompolo)—forced the issue of amnesty. Few in government thought the militias would accept, but at the last minute, most major leaders conceded, based partly on intelligence that defense hawks were planning large raids if they did not. Almost immediately thereafter, President Yar'Adua's six-month absence and eventual death in May 2010 created a political crisis that understandably drew focus away from the Niger Delta issues.

By the time Goodluck Jonathan assumed the presidency, vested interests and expectations around the amnesty program had hardened considerably. The original memo proposing amnesty likely came from his office. But by summer 2010, multiple negotiators and bagmen serving different power centers—including two antagonistic Niger Delta governors—were claiming credit for luring “the boys” out of the creeks. A few Yar'Adua loyalists resisted turning over control of the program. Other political figures increasingly used the amnesty as an election patronage tool. The president, an ethnic Ijaw with a relatively small national network, was the first serious contender from the Niger Delta. His candidacy also came at a time when the ruling party's ethnic-based power-sharing compact had collapsed—a

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situation that would have challenged any politician. The weakening security situation in the north, due in part to attacks by Islamist phenomenon Boko Haram, further distracted attention away from the delta. The presidency would later announce that military forces were active in thirty-four of Nigeria's thirty-six states.

The above situation led to an early and sustained neglect of conflict resolution fundamentals. The 2009 Niger Delta amnesty ultimately showed a similar trait to past government-led conflict initiatives: a preference for short-term crisis management over resolution or transformation. On request, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) hastily drafted an implementation plan before Christmas 2009, but it was not fully adopted. In the lexicon of conflict resolution, "amnesty" is nothing more than an early term in a negotiated peace settlement. Nigerian officials billed the amnesty program as a comprehensive disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) exercise, but the reintegration phase remained skeletal. There was limited provision for the next steps, including mediation and dialogue, health and trauma support, institutional reform, education, or communications. Communities affected by violence were offered little beyond a small victim's compensation fund.

Neglect of "Root Causes"

A related and common criticism is that the amnesty has not addressed the root causes of Niger Delta conflict. As a critique, this is both true and somewhat misplaced. Interviewees generally agreed that neither the amnesty program nor most other recent, complementary initiatives have meaningfully reduced the widespread corruption, zero-sum resource competition, inequality, underdevelopment, local economic dysfunction, high youth unemployment, environmental degradation, lack of public accountability, or criminality that fueled past violence in the region. The amnesty also does not appear to be part of any larger Niger Delta peace plan. It has changed how aspects of the area's multibillion-dollar conflict economy work but without clearly reducing its scale or complexity.

The above notwithstanding, it is unreasonable to expect a government-funded DDR program to do any of these things alone. Addressing even one of the conflict drivers would require fortuitous political conditions and a massive, coordinated investment over one or more generations. On economic issues, for instance, it is true that the increased capital spending in some parts of the delta—some of it impressive in appearance³—appears ad hoc and not linked to any Niger Delta development master plan. Because Nigerian government project expenditure in the delta tends to be opaque, geographically disbursed, and unmonitored, its development impacts are hard to measure. But Nigeria's federal structure and divisive oil revenue allocation politics make coordinated planning a near impossibility, and the Jonathan administration is only the latest of many governments to confront this problem.

Allegations of Self-Enrichment

Over time, some actors also used the amnesty as a vehicle for self-enrichment. Interviews and proposals to U.S. institutions show that consultants and political insiders made sizable profits moving ex-fighters to schools outside Nigeria. While not illegal, the value of some of these relationships could be questioned if the militants involved do not find work. Quite a few of the first crop of 20,192 registered ex-combatants were not demobilized fighters at all. Tensions flared repeatedly when the Amnesty Office paid participants' monthly stipends through their militant commanders, who then pocketed part of the money. The main leaders also received significant transfers of cash, goods, and contracts themselves, in amounts reflecting calculations of how dangerous each was.

Voices in media and civil society have been particularly skeptical of these latter payments, but again they should be understood in a wider context. Payouts to militia leaders have been common in peace settlements across Africa and beyond. The amnesty is also far

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from solely responsible for enriching Niger Delta militant leaders. By 2009, the main commanders—particularly those operating under the banner of the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND)—were already significant players in the local conflict economy. They earned large sums through pipeline surveillance and oil-spill cleanup contracts. They rented houseboats and other equipment to oil companies. They received regular cash handouts from state and IOC security budgets. By the late 2000s, militants who had set out to challenge the abuses of ruling big men had become big men themselves. This does not mean they had no genuine grievances or that they did not believe in their stated goals. But as with many guerrilla movements, early political co-option, access to illicit commodity flows, and the lack of a serious intellectual wing kept leaders from articulating a vision of success beyond the accumulation of wealth and power. Against this backdrop, it is doubtful the militias would have dropped arms in late 2009 without being well paid.

“Warlordism” and Organized Crime

Perhaps the strongest criticism of the amnesty is that its transfers of wealth and political power have turned militant leaders into “warlords.” At first glance, this designation appears apt in several ways. The most influential ex-commanders now hold government mandates to guard national oil company pipelines and help police Nigeria’s coastal and inland waters. Military and police forces—which once engaged leaders in armed combat—provide them and their associates security details in Lagos and Abuja. State governors defer to them on some decisions. A handful of ex-militants have come to rival the state as providers of public services, offering communities food, education, and health care. A few arbitrate local disputes and regulate access to land, water, or other natural resources within limited boundaries. Finally, as will be discussed later in this report, some ex-fighters have assumed the warlord-like roles of middleman and beneficiary from organized crime.

But how much Niger Delta militants resemble warlords from other conflict zones? The federal government arguably has not ceded them territorial sovereignty or a monopoly on violence to the extent seen in Afghanistan, Liberia, Somalia, or other warlord strongholds. Neither does the state lack physical or legal access to militant turf, as has been the case in Chechnya or Pakistan’s Federally Administered Tribal Areas. Niger Delta militants do not have the political footholds or records of atrocities seen in some places, where disturbed individuals who carried out massacres, regulated trade, used child soldiers, and murdered heads of state won high seats in government. Nor do they seem to have created large “shadow states” that eclipse the Nigerian government in legitimacy, diplomatic presence, or ultimate territorial control, thereby signaling “state failure.” It should also be remembered that periods of militia activity are common in underserved, weakly governed, rural, ethnic-minority enclaves like the Niger Delta, particularly when the formal state is transitioning from military to democratic rule.

Arguably the ultimate measure of security risk from a warlord is the amount of difficulty the state faces in dislodging him from his turf. No strong evidence suggests Nigeria’s security forces could not corral the current group of Niger Delta militant leaders if called upon. The main commanders likely are weaker in fighting strength and tactical sophistication than the military. They may know the terrain better, but they do not control human or signals intelligence out of the region. Most major military strikes on militant positions during the 2000s ended in quick retreats, particularly when air strikes were used. So long as the delta remains calm, however, provoking the ex-commanders through military action would make little sense.

Interviewees for this report were divided on the success of ex-militant commanders in maintaining their operational capabilities over the past four years. An unstated goal of the amnesty was to break their command structures and weaken their ground games. The

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program made some progress in this area, for example, by housing aging commanders in Lagos and Abuja, outside their main operating areas; by sending their foot soldiers out of the country on lengthy training engagements; and by sharing funds unequally in ways that encouraged rumor, grievance, and division. The security contracts leaders have kept several thousand young men and women loyal to them, though perhaps in more vestigial ways. A few have lost key lieutenants and aides. Many may no longer maintain active forward bases or camps in their old host communities. In late 2007, when militant camp operations were nearing their peak, a confidential JTF memo predicted that if attacked by government, the major camps in Bayelsa and Delta States could muster roughly 1,800 fighters, many of them not well trained.⁴

Some officials argue that the risk ex-commanders pose is minimal: They say government has outsourced human, national, and asset security temporarily to those best able to provide it. There is something to this: State agencies lack the capacity to fully police the delta's tough terrain, and private security firms linked to militants seemingly may have helped restore order in some locales. But as examples from other countries show, it is shortsighted to treat warlord-like figures as agents of peace or statebuilding or to assume that their interests coincide with those of government or the populations they control. Warlords are conflict entrepreneurs whose positions depend on violence, and typically they will fall back on violence, more or less successfully, to get what they want. Of perhaps particular relevance to the delta, history shows that warlords seldom survive without state acquiescence or support. Often their powers collapse once the state withdraws patronage, as occurred in post-Soviet Georgia or with some Sunni strongmen in occupation-era Iraq. It is doubtful ex-militant commanders control local patronage networks to the exclusion of other political players, and community perceptions and support for them are unclear.

While the amnesty has not created warlords in the worst senses, it arguably has helped strengthen the local environment to enable certain types of crime. Organized criminality in the Niger Delta, from bank robbery and kidnapping to industrial-scale oil theft and arms and drug trafficking, certainly predates 2009. Facilitation of crime around the amnesty, it should be noted, was not an overt federal government policy. But in some cases, the cease-fire conditions that went along with the program gave violent actors fresh political standing and cover to engage in crime. The recent booms in Gulf of Guinea sea piracy and the illegal refining of stolen oil have strong links to ex-militants. Oil theft, in turn, has undermined the higher production and revenues from the amnesty, sped up environmental devastation, and forced Nigeria to draw on savings at a time of high global oil prices. Nothing says the trends are irreversible, and a zero-tolerance policy for some types of crime could seriously jeopardize the peace. But again, addressing Niger Delta organized criminality at this stage carries an uncertain amount of risk.

What can be said with certainty is this: The amnesty and its aftermath have created some new space for violent actors in national politics. Compared with some conflict-affected nations, their powers may be relatively small. But now that the space for them has opened, others likely will compete to fill it once the current group is finished. Closing this space will pose a fresh challenge in Nigerian political life, whether it is done by President Jonathan or a successor.

What Is Next?

There is a significant chance the Niger Delta could see renewed violent conflict in the next one to two years. As discussed earlier, major conflict drivers remain in place and no long-term peace plan exists. The next one to two years likely will bring strong flash points and triggers. A majority of interviewees also agreed that arms are still plentiful in the region,

despite the various disarmament exercises carried out around the amnesty. Most recently, for instance, an Interagency Task Force (IATF) announced it had turned over 39,880 pieces of arms and ammunition to the 82nd Army Division for destruction under UN guidelines. The IATF reportedly collected and verified those weapons from the final 3,642 militants reportedly enrolled in the amnesty.

Precisely when and how violence would return is far from clear, however, and very little should be assumed at this point. History shows that predicting Niger Delta conflict trajectories is challenging, and the limited analysis that follows comes with a number of caveats.

First, the conflict landscape is highly complex. There is no single Niger Delta conflict. Rather, the area is home to a system of small, largely resource-based conflicts in which violence plays many roles. There are multiple shifting, overlapping power centers, aggressors, modus operandi, targets, and goals. Given that links to political competition and organized crime are common, any localized outbreak of violence can have personal, communal, state, national, and transnational dimensions. Additionally, while this report necessarily offers a broad-brush regional overview, the most rigorous conflict analyses zoom in at higher levels of granularity—for example, by treating each of the four core states separately.

Second, the onset of violence is often unexpected. Some outbreaks follow long escalation periods that few outside the region observe. Others escalate quickly, as relatively closed disputes with small, localized triggers take on broader significance and draw in outside actors. Early warning systems are weak across the region, and many unforeseen forces and events can act as threat multipliers.

Third, obtaining reliable intelligence is very difficult. Poor communications infrastructure, lack of penetration by law enforcement, the inhibiting presence of organized criminal groups, and the division of the region into thousands of small, rural, isolated villages all restrict information flows in and out. At the same time, the Niger Delta can be a noisy intelligence environment where sources are adept at using statements to advance their own interests over those of competitors. The mistrustful, clientelistic, factionalized, unaccountable, and often extortion-based political climate further encourages the spread of unreliable information, as does the robust local conflict economy. Sensationalist, low-quality media reporting and the co-option of dissenting voices by government also complicate matters.

Fourth, the findings in this report are based mainly on one-on-one interviews, not on any scenario planning, conflict assessment, profiling or mapping, or other more structured analytical exercise. As such, certain types of conclusions—the description of best-, middle-, and worst-case scenarios, for instance—are omitted, as these would require more structured data collection and analysis.

Fifth, analyses of Niger Delta conflict often overlook factors that reduce the risks of violence or that keep the region resilient when faced with sociopolitical shocks. A full analysis of conflict mitigators is outside the scope of this report, though many have already been mentioned. A number of factors—the delta's ethnic diversity and crowded political environment, for example—can also be mitigating or aggravating, depending on how they interact with other variables.

Triggers

The next major conflict flash point in the Niger Delta will likely be the 2015 presidential and gubernatorial elections. Major cycles of violence in the delta have tracked the electoral cycle since military rule ended in 1999. Particularly around the 2003 and 2007 polls, candidates often bankrolled the worst pre- and postelection violence as a survival mechanism. Conflict moved through a common set of stages, from early recruitment to postvoting clashes. Lack of public accountability encouraged the violence.

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The presidency is Nigeria's ultimate political prize. Current revenue-sharing policies concentrate oil wealth at the federal level, and the 1999 Constitution creates a unitary executive with powers far greater than the legislative or judicial branches. The country's ethnocentric, sharing-based brand of federalism and its crowded political playing field further strengthen the view of elections as do-or-die affairs. Deep reforms to Nigeria's federal structure, pushing more power and resources away from the center and down to the states, are overdue. But the Jonathan government does not look well placed to sponsor them, and campaigning has kicked off unusually early this time.

Tensions around the 2015 presidential race could be the highest yet in the delta. It is now widely thought that President Jonathan will seek a second term. Much of the northern political establishment may resist this, as may opposition enclaves in the southwest. Northern voices in particular argue, rightly or wrongly that the presidency has marginalized them and their states in government contract awards, access to oil revenue, and key political appointments. Perceptions that the president listens only to a closed, Ijaw-centric inner circle further stoke resentments. For their part, Niger Delta elites worry that one of their own may not occupy the seat of power anytime soon after Jonathan leaves office and that his successor would reverse many of the benefits they now enjoy.

Some possible triggers could have only distant ties to elections. In the run-up to 2015, for instance, violence could flare around local law enforcement efforts, particularly JTF action against oil theft. During the 2000s, skirmishes between soldiers and militants over stolen oil triggered a number of larger violent episodes. Some of the more financially independent groups could react badly to a crackdown on theft, not least those that have enjoyed periods of relative impunity. No serious fights have broken out thus far, it should be noted, despite reports that late in 2012 the JTF began destroying more barges, boats, storage, and cottage refineries involved in oil theft.

Some interviewees thought it possible that militants dissatisfied with or excluded from the amnesty program could launch fresh attacks before voting day. Recently some ex-commanders did publicly criticize the presidency on various grounds. But these leaders probably were seeking leverage for the renewal of certain contracts, not signaling any impending revolt. Small youth factions from other significant Niger Delta ethnic groups—notably Itsekiris, Urhobos, Ogonis, and Isokos—complain that Ijaws have hijacked the amnesty program, but none appear ready to take up arms. A few interviewees thought disputes between the main commanders and their troops over wealth sharing could cause splinter groups to form in the next one to two years. Such rifts did help create a number of strong new leaders in the 2000s, Farah Dagogo, Soboma George, and Tompolo among them. Recent months also saw one-off protests from alleged militants in a few urban areas, mostly over noninclusion in the amnesty program. The Amnesty Office says the program is closed to new entrants, but demands on government for stipends, security contracts, and other benefits persist.

The presidency would control much of the strategy for responding to new violence, though interviewees split on what quality of leadership to expect. Some noted that the president took office at a fraught moment in Nigeria's political history and may face stronger negative pressures from the delta's worst elements than past heads of state. Critics further characterized the administration's decision making on security as slow, wavering, and insular. By contrast, others posited that because President Jonathan is from the delta, and hence "knows the problems" and the actors, his chances to keep the region secure should be uniquely good. Presidency officials and others argued further that Jonathan's leadership has been critical to sustaining the current four-year cease-fire—an unprecedented event in Nigeria's recent history.

To be clear, no available evidence suggests that a large-scale revolt by armed actors, either against the presidency or one of the Niger Delta governors, is in the works. There is

also little cause to think the Jonathan administration could not handle a limited rebellion or other violent flare-ups. Since the amnesty, the government has pursued a largely successful two-pronged strategy for dealing with armed actors in the delta, rewarding the peaceable while neutralizing dissenters—for instance, the cases of Kitikata, Commander Obese, and John Togo. A breakaway militant leader would need significant tactical sophistication, operational strength, and political cover to stay active for long. The twenty-four-year South African prison sentence former MEND affiliate and arms dealer Henry Okah received in March 2013 for his role in the 2010 Abuja Independence Day bombings could also deter some comers, though the facts of that case are unique. At the same time, a key open question around the amnesty is what happens when the current group of commanders loses control over their men and turf?

The 2015 elections could be pivotal in shaping future nonstate armed group activity in the delta. At this point, it is not clear whether area powerbrokers—or, perhaps, well-networked outsiders—will engage armed actors to frustrate polls or pay them to sit the day out, as happened in 2011. The coming months may tell more: In past election cycles, major mobilization started twelve to eighteen months before poll day. While pro-Jonathan sentiment likely remains strong, it should not be assumed that all violent actors ultimately will side with the presidency in an election battle. Government must successfully manage the phaseout of the amnesty program, currently announced for 2015. With loyalty and trust running thin, some leaders could be available to the highest bidder. Certainly the number of potential paymasters and spoilers courting militants will rise as voting nears, and opposition party alliances should be fluid. Opposition operatives approached a few militant commanders in the run-up to 2011, though without much success.

Early signs of weakened support for President Jonathan's candidacy could also fuel organized violence, though again signs for this are minimal at this point. Some interviewees thought Niger Delta elites would bankroll attacks within the region if the Jonathan presidency looked threatened. Doing so, they said, would demonstrate the risks to Nigeria of removing an Ijaw from office or potentially cutting them off from patronage. A military coup and the resuscitation of earlier impeachment threats against President Jonathan were cited as possible triggers, but from available evidence the risk of either appears small at this time. Alternatively, if one or more of the outgoing Niger Delta governors from the ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP) do not back the president (possible in Rivers State) or if their chosen successors appear in danger of losing (most likely in Delta State), party chieftains could seek alternative power centers, which could turn messy. Governors who started strong on security could also slip as their terms end, their powers lessen, and their attentions shift. Several thought the PDP presidential primary, occurring in the months before elections, could be a tipping point toward either peace or conflict, depending on the threat to President Jonathan winning the nomination. Ruling party politics do look somewhat fractious right now, but no durable rival or opposition block to the president has emerged.

Election day and the postelection period typically bring additional conflict risks in the delta. The 2003 and 2007 elections in the delta showed that ruling-party officials facing a close race can panic, with negative consequences for long-term security. What if projected margins in the 2015 nationwide popular vote were tight or the president looked set to lose the 25 percent of votes in two-thirds of states needed to avoid a runoff under the constitution? No security outcomes whatsoever should be assumed, especially after the mostly peaceful precedent of 2011. But it is not inconceivable that ground-level officials charged with delivering votes could fall back on the sorts of rigging, vote buying, targeted killings, mobilization of new armed groups, and other violent interventions seen earlier in the region. Interviewees thought immediate postelection violence would be more likely if Jonathan were to lose or if one or more gubernatorial polls were dramatically rigged. In

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that event, several sources thought, the Niger Delta could face a mirror image of the more or less spontaneous rioting, looting, and ethnic-based killing that the north saw after the 2011 presidential poll. The worst violence in 2003 and 2007 arose some months after polls closed, much of it the result of politicians first funding and then dropping armed groups. Whether this pattern repeats should depend heavily on preelection events.

Violence around Elections Not Inevitable

It is certainly possible that the election season will pass without a major, prolonged return to violence in the delta. Despite some of the misconduct, tensions, and closed-door deals described earlier, the region could stay calm. The opposition may fracture or fail to float a serious consensus candidate for president, a northern Christian in particular. Given that the core states should vote overwhelmingly for Jonathan, incentives to tamper violently with polls should stay relatively low. The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) has also taken some further steps to frustrate electoral malpractice. As commander in chief, an incumbent president has the significant advantage of controlling the security forces.

The role of money is a particular wild card. Disputes over oil wealth could trigger any number of violent episodes in the coming period. However, ad hoc distributions of oil money, whether through the amnesty program or otherwise, have brought the region through some tense periods since 2009, and there's nothing definitive to imply this status quo is unsustainable. Another round of Niger Delta violence might also be too expensive for the government as 2015 nears. In addition to the usual fiscal pressures that accompany Nigerian elections, the Jonathan administration is facing heavy domestic fuel subsidies, steep oil price and production targets in its 2013 budget, an ambitious debt-reduction plan, the start-up of a sovereign wealth fund, chronic national oil company funding challenges, and high losses from oil theft, among other challenges. At the same time, trapped investment, high security costs, aging oil fields, and falling global demand for Nigerian hydrocarbons are reducing the government's per barrel earnings from oil. Industry consultants claim—not always reliably—that production declines could cost Nigeria billions by mid-decade. And critically, costs of the election patronage system may trend upward, as the 2011–12 fuel subsidy scandal arguably portends. Nigeria today is not Zimbabwe or Mubutu-era Congo, where runaway patronage machines collapsed public financial management systems and, eventually, whole economies. With global light sweet crude prices forecasted to stay above \$100 per barrel, government should also be flush with cash. But with oil still making up 80 percent of public revenue, any major spike in Niger Delta violence that affects operations could compound fiscal pressures significantly.

Finally, it is still unclear how far conflict around the 2015 elections will reflect deeper sociopolitical divisions in Nigeria—or even how deep divisions run. Some have suggested that the strong north-south split in the 2011 presidential voting, together with the northern-based violence that followed, revealed a country so polarized along ethnic and religious lines that it risked partition or future civil war. Accepting this view, one could argue that the even greater ethnic rancor expected in 2015 will likely increase the risks of violence, both in the Niger Delta and perhaps nationwide. Certainly some politicians are ratcheting up their identity-based rhetoric, and the elections do come at a time when some of the old rules of Nigeria's ethnocentric, military-backed, patronage-driven political economy seem strained. Various factors, from the breakdown of the PDP's presidential "zoning" system to 2011 gains by opposition parties, are also testing the country's political traditions of negotiation, consensus building, and wealth sharing across ethnopolitical lines. Causal links between national politics and Niger Delta security may be stronger and more complex than perhaps at any point in Nigeria's history.

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But if the old rules are strained, nothing concrete suggests that they are now irretrievably broken or cannot bend to meet changing realities. The Jonathan presidency operates day to day using a political playbook that does not differ fundamentally from what predecessors had. Furthermore, the 2011 presidential voting split could show that Nigerian electoral politics remains more about identity-based mobilization than issues or ideology. Some interviewees thought that despite strong incentives for violence, enough of the senior establishment still recall too clearly the legacy of the Biafran Civil War (1967–70) to risk taking the country into prolonged, widespread conflict.

Future Trends

If serious violence were to return to the Niger Delta, how would the situation look? This report finds very little consensus. Interviewees were divided, for instance, on whether violent actors would adapt tactics used by Islamist groups like Boko Haram. Some thought, for example, that the next wave of conflict would include more attacks on civilians, urban areas, and senior government officials, likely using remote, high-casualty weapons, such as timed car bombs. Each cycle of violence during the 2000s introduced more sophisticated hardware and modes of attack, and damages rose proportionately.⁵ But others argued that such attacks would remain relatively rare, as they would draw heavy responses from state security forces and prove unpalatable to local backers.

More interviewees agreed with the proposition that targets would become more diverse and geographically widespread as insurgents grew leaner and more mobile. The local roots of some Niger Delta violence weakened considerably over the 2000s as goals shifted, grassroots sympathies for militancy waned, and some commanders became more financially self-reliant. Leaders came to see the practice of maintaining large fighting forces in rural camps, even on a part-time basis, as expensive and unwieldy. Old militant umbrella groups—MEND, for instance—are basically defunct and were little more than brand names from the start. Thus, there is some reason to think future armed groups will adopt less hierarchical and more cell-like organizational structures. A number of interviewees also predicted more attacks outside of the Niger Delta, with perpetrators again mimicking tactics of northern Islamist groups. This last scenario does seem possible, though choosing high-value targets in Lagos, Abuja, or key northern cities could risk serious state retribution.

None of the types of high-impact incidents mentioned have been common in the delta to date. Most violence in the period leading up to the amnesty happened in relatively isolated areas and targeted oil infrastructure rather than people. The bulk of casualties came from clashes between militants and government troops, rather than from civilian deaths. The most significant anomalies are shown in table 1.

A majority of sources agreed that ramping up expatriate kidnappings to pre-2009 levels would be a more likely, cost-effective, and risk-averse way for violent actors to disrupt political and commercial life, as could more kidnappings of ranking politicians and their family members. The state security forces, it should be noted, have developed improved strategies and mandates to handle kidnappers.

Whether tactics and targets shift also depends partly on changes in the goals of violence. By the late 2000s, most militant attacks in the delta operated within the accepted, if not static, limits of the local conflict economy. Violence set prices, regulated competition for resources, forced negotiations, limited demands, and answered questions of equity. Causing permanent material damage, promoting particular ideologies, or destabilizing the government were not big priorities. The picture was seldom simple, not least because different tiers of violent actors could have different reasons for committing the same crime. Groups might damage an oil pipeline, for instance, to steal oil, extract money from officials or the IOCs, protest government or IOC actions, or attract media attention.

Table 1. Past Attempts at High-Impact Violence in the Niger Delta

Type	Incident	Casualties (est.)	Date
Urban bombing	Car bomb explodes outside Nigerian Army barracks in Port Harcourt	2–3	April 20, 2006
	Two car bombs explode outside IOC compounds in Port Harcourt	0	December 18, 2006
	Car bomb explodes outside Rivers State government building in Port Harcourt	0	December 23, 2006
	Car bomb planted but not detonated outside Shell Port Harcourt compound	0	January 5, 2007
	Car bomb explodes at amnesty conference in Warri	0	March 15, 2010
Other large-scale urban attack	Battle between rival armed groups spills over into Port Harcourt streets	16	August 2004
	Competing armed groups street battle each other in Port Harcourt	Several dozen	July–August 2007
	Militants raid two Port Harcourt police stations	15	December 31, 2007
Attack on senior government official	None of significance; most deaths of politicians relate to election turf battles with rivals	Few	Various
Attack outside Niger Delta	MEND strike on Atlas Cove in Lagos	10	June 12, 2009
	Independence Day bombing in Abuja	12	October 1, 2010

Sources: Media clippings, Human Rights Watch and other NGO reports, author interviews

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Few things would upend expectations in the Niger Delta as dramatically as the appearance of violent actors who could not be bought or who had larger political aims. Some interviewees warned that the coming generation would be “nastier,” “harder to handle,” and “less rational,” but all stopped short of saying members would show themselves to be radicalized, intractable, or ideologically driven. Assuming the new generation would have similar goals as in the past, some interviewees thought for instance that the oil infrastructure bombings seen regularly before 2009 would remain rare as long as guarding installations paid better and a Niger Deltan held the presidency. Such predictions make logical sense, but it is too early to predict whether future insurgent calculations would shift greatly.

Conclusion

Any leader seeking to secure the Niger Delta must confront high pressures, risks, and contradictions. The environment is challenging and fluid, the vested interests resourceful and entrenched. The public initiatives that could help build lasting peace—federal restructuring,

political party reform, improved electricity, legitimate petroleum-products supply, and a war on organized criminal elements in government—would take years, even with reliable government support. Most of these same changes would compound the short-term risks of violence, particularly as 2015 nears. Yet despite many worrying signals, a return to major violent conflict does not look inevitable at this point. The road ahead is far too busy for doomsday forecasts, and Nigeria tends to embarrass those who predict its imminent unraveling.

Notes

1. Technical Committee on the Niger Delta, *Report of the Technical Committee on the Niger Delta*, vol. 1 (November 2008).
2. See, for example, Drew Hinshaw, "Nigeria's Former Oil Bandits Now Collect Government Cash," *Wall Street Journal*, August 22, 2012.
3. For federal examples, see Office of the Special Adviser to the President on Research, Documentation and Strategy, *Sure and Steady Transformation: Progress Report of President Goodluck Jonathan's Administration*, vol. 1 (Lagos: GDP Associates, 2012), http://sureandsteadytransformation.gov.ng/download/Sure_and_Steady_Transformation_Volume_One.pdf.
4. "Brief for Chief of Defense State on Strategies to Stem Out Militant Activities," unpublished, 2007.
5. See Chris Newsom, *Conflict in the Niger Delta: More than a Local Affair*, Special Report no. 271 (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, June 2011).

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