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# Energy Infrastructure Attacks Return in Nigeria

In 2009 Nigeria reached an agreement with rebels in the oil-rich Niger Delta, which led to fewer attacks on the local energy infrastructure. Growing cracks in the agreement, however, may lead to a wave of new attacks and is already affecting Nigerian energy production, warns Jennifer Giroux.

By Jennifer Giroux for ISN

Since 2011, as social protests have evolved into violent confrontations and revolutions throughout the Middle East, the security of the region's hydrocarbon assets has been one of the key concerns during the myriad transformations underway - and rightly so. Within the last decade, this complex region, which accounts for 35% of global oil production, has shown time and again how non-state actors leverage networks and geography in dynamic ways in order to oppose political regimes and challenge the status quo. In many cases this has meant that oil and gas (ONG) infrastructures have become primary targets during periods of conflict or political fragility. At the height of the Iraq war, for instance, insurgents strategically targeted energy personnel, pipelines, and electrical pylons, essentially crippling the country's energy sector. More recently, a similar phenomenon has been seen during the Arab Spring where energy assets have been regularly attacked, causing both economic and political damage as well as serving as a platform to internationalize grievances and objectives. One simply has to look at the case of Egypt where regular attacks on the natural gas infrastructure in the Sinai Peninsula have disrupted gas supplies to Jordan and Egypt. In Yemen, attacks on the ONG pipeline network have been so frequent and extensive that it has cost the country \$2 billion in lost revenue in the last year alone.

But while the world's gaze remains centered on the Middle East and North Africa, it is important to remember (when trying to assess where the next cluster of energy infrastructure (EI) threats will arise) that much of the world's hydrocarbon resources either come from or must transit through increasingly uncertain and volatile terrain, where political and social instability intermix with ONG production and exportation. In fact, data collected for the Energy Infrastructure Attack Database (EIAD) -- a dataset for reported attacks by non-state actors on EI since 1980, which was developed by the Center for Security Studies in partnership with the Paul Scherrer Institute -- shows that EI attacks are on the rise within the last decade, with over 325 incidents reported on average each year. However, these incidents are not evenly distributed -- rather, they tend to cluster within certain states or regions at certain points in time. For example, in 2011, EIAD recorded nearly 500 incidents, with the attacks largely coming out of Egypt, Yemen, Colombia, Afghanistan and Pakistan, and India. In 2012, similar clustering trends have been observed with a few geographic shifts. In particular, Nigeria - which has a history of energy infrastructure attacks in the oil producing Niger Delta region - has re-emerged as

a country of concern, and the trend is likely to persist in 2013. Though politically motivated violence aimed at energy assets has been down since the 2009 amnesty, criminal attacks – in the form of onshore oil theft and sabotage, as well as (offshore) maritime criminality and piracy -- have been on the rise. Such attacks can also cause large disruptions to the oil industry, as illustrated in Shell's [recent closure](#) of the Bonny oil pipeline, affecting 150,000 barrels per day of production, due to a fire caused by pipeline sabotage.

## **Nigeria: The Backstory**

Nigeria is the top oil producer in Africa, with 37.2 billion barrels in reserves and an average production rate of 2.17 to 2.4 million barrels per day (bbl/d). It is also a particularly important country for the global oil market, as it produces a light, easily refined variety of crude similar to Algeria and Libya. It also holds the largest natural gas reserves on the continent, even if an underdeveloped infrastructure has limited the maturity of this market. Despite such assets, however, decades of poor microeconomic management, corruption and social and political instability have not only severely hampered growth, but also resulted in multiple *coups d'état*, a civil war, and various outbreaks of violence. In other words, it is a classic 'resource curse' case.

Almost all of these hydrocarbon resources are concentrated in the Niger Delta region (known locally as the 'Oil Rivers') in the southeast of the country where the Niger River flows into the Gulf of Guinea. The last 50 years of oil production have not been kind to this region and living standards have deteriorated significantly. Fishing and agriculture activities, which were once the main source of livelihood, have been severely damaged by the environmental degradation associated with oil production (as well as with oil theft). The presence of the oil industry has fundamentally transformed the region, at times threatening the very survival of the Delta communities and enforcing migratory patterns that have resulted in inter- and intra- community disputes. Over time, feelings of socio-cultural alienation, humiliation, hostility, frustration, and deprivation, coupled with endemic corruption and political abuse, gave rise to protests that then splintered into armed resistance and violent criminality – both of which continue to undermine the security of the region today.

## **Energy Assets Targeted: Unpacking the Trend**

The extensive targeting of energy infrastructure in the Niger Delta – whether for criminal or political purposes – did not appear overnight. The current trends, which are characterized by large-scale oil theft operations (typically involving pipeline sabotage) and offshore attacks aimed at oil tankers, reflect not only how the conflict context is evolving but also the targeting behaviors of the non-state groups (many of which are comprised of criminal entrepreneurs) operating in this region. While manifestations of violence are grounded in community protests that emerged in the 1980s and 90s, it was not until the mid-1990s that arms were introduced into the region on a broad scale. Powered by political actors in the run-up to the country's democratic elections in 1999, armed groups coalesced around political objectives and then shapeshifted into criminal enterprises in the early 2000s. During this time the targeting of energy infrastructure occurred largely for criminal purposes, though politically motivated attacks and disruptions, mainly in the form of blockades, also occurred.

Looking at the open-source data captured in EIAD, there is a clear shift in tactical and targeting behavior in 2005. Prior to this, EI attacks rarely reached the press and, when they did, many appeared to be merely criminal in nature (i.e., involving the sabotage of pipelines, or kidnappings). By 2005 the situation had changed considerably and attacks spiked from less than 20 per year between 2001 and 2005 to 61 attacks in 2006, nearly 70 in 2007 and well over 100 in 2008. These numbers, however, are quite small when compared with [data gathered](#) by the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC), which recorded 500-900 pipeline attacks between 2001-05, 2200 in 2005, and over 3,000 in 2006-07. Both datasets – though different in scale -- reveal a tremendous drop in attacks by June

2009 when the government reached an amnesty deal with the armed groups.

Accounting for this shift was the formation in 2005 of the umbrella militant group the Movement for the Emancipation of the People of the Niger Delta (MEND). The creation of MEND was a consequence of years of tactical development in the region in which armed actors learned how to leverage networks and terrain to achieve objectives. Fueled by the arrests of Ijaw militants and frustration with the political regime, MEND re-energized the political struggle and adopted a targeting strategy that sought to carry out frequent attacks on Nigeria's EI with the aim of significantly affecting supplies (cutting production by 30%), and forcing the government - which depends on oil revenues - to address its political and economic grievances. Fear and damage became the goals. MEND also used EI attacks as a platform to air grievances, often sending statements to media outlets claiming responsibility for attacks. Looking at the factors that allowed for this cluster to emerge, the following aspects are relevant:

- Location of EI: Embedded within the oil communities and highly accessible.
- Security of EI: Security varied and many military officials were not from the region and thus not familiar with terrain.
- Group Motivation: MEND re-energized the political struggle and targeted energy assets rather than local inhabitants.
- Group Characteristics: MEND's membership was comprised of poor, unemployed young Ijaw men and former military personnel from the region.
- Group Tactics: MEND used sophisticated arms and leveraged its familiarity with the Delta mangroves to carry out attacks. It also favored swarm-based maneuvers that used speedboats to quickly attack targets in succession.
- Host Community Characteristics: Hospitable and at times supportive. In some cases host communities would even participate and receive financial rewards.

The combination of these six factors meant that the balance of impact and power was on the side of the militants. Consequently, the government introduced an amnesty agreement in June 2009 that led to the disarming of many groups and the creation of a post-amnesty program to offer ex-militants a pathway to rehabilitation and re-integration. It bears mentioning, however, that a key part of this strategy hinged on paying off rebel leaders - payments that continue today and make up a [reported \\$40 million annually](#).

### **Context Transformation: Criminality Returns & the Coming Wave**

Though EI attacks dropped considerably in 2009, the symptoms that allowed for the 2005-9 cluster to emerge remain. Thus it comes at no surprise that EI attacks in this region are again on the rise - aimed at both onshore and [offshore](#) oil as well as [electricity](#) infrastructure - with the NNPC recording nearly 3,000 pipeline attacks in 2011. The primary characteristic of the emerging cluster is the growing oil theft business, which according to Nigerian officials is costing the government [\\$1 billion per month](#) in lost revenue. Furthermore, community protests aimed at ONG operations are occurring regularly and aggrieved ex-militants have organized blockades at both a [Journalist Union](#) office in the Niger Delta and the [Federal Secretariat building](#) in Abuja to protest the lack of stipend payments.

Looking ahead, the picture looks far from rosy and indicates that another wave of attacks in this region may be imminent. Indeed, big questions surround what the next wave of attacks will look like and how targeting behaviors will evolve. Another important question is whether attacks will be

confined to the shores of Nigeria or will ripple out across the Gulf of Guinea where maritime criminality and piracy aimed at energy carriers is on the rise – up from 25 reported incidents in 2011 to 35 so far this year. One thing, however, is certain: with Abuja dealing with a political crisis and the rise of [Boko Haram](#) in the north, one doubts whether the political will (and even the capacity) exists to anticipate and prevent the coming wave of attacks in the south. In other words, it feels like 2005 all over again.

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