

The Next Gulf?

Oil Politics, Environmental Apocalypse and Rising Tension in the Niger Delta

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Introduction

Oil, one of the greatest blessings God has showered on our nation, has turned out to be a curse... sounding the death-knell of such key principles of good governance as democracy, federalism, transparency, accountability and national growth.¹

The above quotation epitomises the irony of oil endowment in Nigeria. It is contained in the conclusions and recommendations of the Human Rights Violations Investigation Commission (HRVIC), popularly known as the Oputa panel, which was set up by the administration of President Olusegun Obasanjo to assuage and reconcile Nigerians following large-scale abuses of their rights under successive military regimes. As it happens, Nigeria has a huge deposit of crude oil that ranks among the best quality in the world. The oil resources are located in the Niger Delta area of the country.

The Niger Delta covers an area of about 70,000 square kilometres, half of which is wetland, one of the largest in the world and certainly the largest in Africa. The wetland area is made up of 36,000 square kilometres of marshland, creeks, tributaries and lagoons, and is extremely rich in fish and wildlife resources, with a high biodiversity and many unique species of plants and animals.² Most importantly, the Niger Delta harbours Nigeria's crude oil reserves to the tune of 33 billion barrels, while the natural gas reserves are

160 trillion cu.ft (2003 figures).³ From oil alone, Nigeria generated about US\$300 billion between 1970 and 2000, amounting to 96% of the country's foreign earnings.⁴ This figure represents the official data. However, Nigeria may have generated far more than that given the fact that the country has poor documentation processes and a pervasive culture of corruption.

A common belief is that Nigerians only know what the government of the day wants them to know as far as oil transactions are concerned. This notion has gained increasing acceptability, especially since 1999 when President Obasanjo came to power. This is not unconnected with the fact that since then the president, due to his failure to appoint a substantive Minister of Petroleum, doubles as the President of the Republic and the Minister of Petroleum, with an advisor. This leaves room for doubt as regards the official declaration of oil revenues, and especially as Nigeria has never had it so good in terms of international oil prices.

Against this background, many argue that Nigeria should have reduced or eliminated poverty. With prudent management of resources, it should rank among the richest countries of the world. Paradoxically, Nigeria ranks among the poorest countries of the world. In July 2006, the available statistics indicated that despite official claims to the contrary, over 70% of Nigerians lived in abject poverty, surviving on US\$1 or less per day. To reduce the number of those in poverty by half by 2015, Nigeria would require an annual GDP growth rate in the order of 7-8%. The country's economy, unfortunately, is only growing at 3% per annum.⁵ To make matters worse, the Niger Delta where the oil resources ("black gold") are exploited has been enmeshed in a deepening crisis of environmental insecurity and is, ironically, one of the poorest and least developed areas in Nigeria.⁶ This has resulted in different forms of protests, both peaceful and violent, from the oil-producing communities. While the government and oil companies have responded in certain ways, as will be shown shortly, such responses have not been able to adequately redress the endemic grievances of the Niger Delta people. In most cases, the responses have in fact exacerbated the violent conflagration that has enveloped the region over the years.⁷ Indeed, the increasing radicalisation and militarisation of the struggle for resource control and the unprecedented emergence of ethnic militias

competing with the state over its monopoly on the instruments of force in the area captures the failure of these responses better. Some of the ethnic militias include the Egbesu Boys, the Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force (NDPVF) and the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND).⁸

It was on account of these deepening contradictions in the Niger Delta that a recent publication described the region as possibly "the next Gulf".⁹ The account, no doubt, represents one of the most penetrating and insightful analysis of the Niger Delta crisis, as much as it is frightening. It raises some pertinent questions: Has the Niger Delta crisis really degenerated to a state that it could be considered as the next Gulf? How can we appropriately locate the deepening crisis of the Niger Delta? What accounts for the failure of state and corporate responses to the crisis? How can the new environment of democracy be exploited to find lasting solutions to the problems of the Niger Delta? We critically engage these and related questions in this paper and argue that the deepening crisis of the Niger Delta can be adequately located in the character of the Nigerian state, particularly its dependence, lack of autonomy and its prebendal and patrimonial tendencies that allow for the privatisation of the state. Unless these attributes are fundamentally redressed, we submit that the Niger Delta, given recent happenings in the area as will be illustrated herein, has the potential to degenerate into the next Gulf.

The study is divided into five sections. The first substantive part of the paper attempts a theoretical exposition on the Nigerian state upon which the paper's analyses are anchored. The second reflects on Nigeria's political economy of oil, underscoring how oil has, since the 1970s, become the mainstay of the economy and led to the mishandling of its proceeds. The next illustrates the other side of oil not only for the country, but especially the Niger Delta: oil has become a curse in terms of environmental insecurity and attendant woes. This is followed by the responses of the major stakeholders – the oil-bearing communities, oil multinationals and the Nigerian state – and how such responses have worsened the situation. We also examine how the opportunities offered by the new democracy such as the Oputal Panel and the National Political Reform Conference (NPRC) were squandered by the major actors and the impacts of these failures on the "new" form and character of violence in the Niger Delta.

On these notes, the paper queries whether the Niger Delta could actually become the next Gulf given the current similarities. The last section concludes and offers some actionable suggestions for taming the monster, which the Niger Delta has become.

The Nigerian State in Perspective

The region known as Nigeria today consisted of different groups before the advent of colonialism, which operated different administrative systems that were suitable for their respective entities. Through such systems, the various groups were able to maintain law and order and maintain symbolic coherence between the mini-state and society in a mutually reinforcing way. Colonialism brought together these separate groups and systems to create Nigeria in a manner that disregarded the existing disparities in cultural values and preferences.¹⁰ As a consequence, the amalgamation of 1914, despite all pretence to the contrary, failed to achieve the desire for unity by the British colonialists. Despite the amalgamation, the Southern and Northern protectorates “continued to develop along different lines”,¹¹ with mutual suspicion into the bargain. Nigeria was ushered into political independence in 1960 with these contradictions intact.

The colonial legacy bequeathed the Nigerian state certain characteristics. First, the post-colonial Nigerian state, like its colonial progenitor and other African states, remains a law and order state based upon the use of force. Recall that the colonial state, following the failure of its ideologies of legitimation, such as one that presents the acquisition of Western education as a guarantee for success and the promise of independence, created a serious legitimacy vacuum for the colonial government. To restore order to the system, the state became ‘hard’ in its deployment of force against the society but ‘soft’ economically in the provision of peoples’ welfare. This created a legitimacy crisis for the state and widened the gap between the state and society.

It is also important to recall that the colonial origin of the Nigerian state ensured its premature integration into global capitalism. This was to facilitate the very objective of colonialism – exploitation of capital and surplus value.

This is what Osaghae referred to as the “extractive role” of the state.¹² Thus, the conception of the state as an instrument of accumulation and patron-client ties as the dominant mode of political relations began to crystallise. In these perverse relations, the state lacked autonomy because its apparatuses were not only underdeveloped, but also captured by the governing elite to advance their parochial interests. The attendant privatisation of the state, defined as the appropriation of the state to service private interests by the dominant faction of the elite,¹³ became deeply engrained in the political system so as to thwart any attempt to reverse the trend. As Wayne Nafziger expresses it very powerfully:

These elites may not benefit from avoiding political decay through nurturing free entry and the rule of law and reducing corruption and exploitation. Instead, political leaders may gain more from extensive unproductive, profit seeking activities in a political system they control than from long-term efforts to build a well functioning state in which economic progress and democratic institutions flourish.¹⁴

Although Nigeria became independent in 1960, this perception of the state has persisted, after the local elites took over from the colonialists. As in most post-colonial African states, the opportunities offered by independence to dismantle the negative legacies of colonialism were squandered by the new power elite. Instead, they were incorporated into the networks of the global capitalist system to consolidate the stronghold of foreign capital on the Nigerian economy. Consequently, the social structures and character of the state, as explained above, were kept intact in spite of independence. Accordingly, the Nigerian state remains a rentier state dependent almost entirely on revenues from oil, grossly lacking in autonomy from vested interests, and relying on the use of force to quench all protests against its exploitative and accumulative dispositions, particularly from the oil-producing communities.

These characteristics of the Nigerian state, have, undeservedly, put the Niger Delta that harbours the oil into a very difficult crisis of development. The failure of non-violent measures such as peaceful protests, media and publicity,

and litigation to yield the desired results has resulted in the radicalisation of the struggle for redress through violent means.¹⁵ Conflicts theories have shown that when a cultural group's shared grievances about unequal or unfair treatment are combined with a strong sense of group identity, there is a tendency for the outbreak of violent responses against the source of their deprivation, either real or imagined.¹⁶ The depth of the deprivation, as perceived by the victims, is central to the volatility of attendant violence. And from historical occurrences in the Niger Delta, it is certain that the sense of deprivation shared by the people is deep-rooted, demanding more attention than is currently the case, before it degenerates into another Gulf war. The fact that the Niger Delta issue held the NPRC ransom for three weeks and eventually sounded the death knell of the NPRC, forcing it into an abrupt end, is testimony enough.¹⁷ It is within this context that a better understanding of the deepening crisis of the Niger Delta can be situated.

The Political Economy of Oil

Since the discovery of oil in commercial quantities at Oloibiri, a small town in the Niger Delta, in 1956, the oil sector has experienced phenomenal growth and grown in importance in the country. From the 1970s, oil has totally eclipsed agriculture as the engine of the economy in all ramifications. For example, from less than 1% in 1960, the contribution of oil to GDP rose to 14.6, 21.9 and 26-29% in 1970, 1975 and 1979, respectively. By 1992, it had risen to 46.8%. Oil's contribution to export earnings has been much higher. From 58.1% in 1970; it rose to 95.6% in 1979. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, it remained very high, accounting for ₦210 billion or 96.1% of total export earnings in 1996.¹⁸ The centrality of oil to the Nigerian economy can further be gleaned from table 1.

Table 1: Crude oil and non-oil export earnings in Nigeria, 1988–1996¹⁹

Year	Exports of goods and services	Oil (%)	Non-oil (%) including invisibles	Non-oil (%) excluding invisibles
1988	31.7	89.5	10.5	8.8
1989	63.2	87.0	13.0	4.7
1990	120.1	88.8	11.2	2.3
1991	132.4	88.3	11.7	3.5
1992	226.9	88.8	11.2	1.9
1993	245.7	87.0	13.0	2.0
1994	215.5	93.2	6.8	2.5
1995	875.5	92.0	8.0	2.3
1996	1186.1	93.2	6.5	1.7

Today, oil remains the mainstay of Nigerian foreign earnings. The hopes for better conditions of living this has generated among the oil-bearing communities, high as they were, have been largely squandered. This was particularly the case under successive military regimes known for their over-centralisation of power and resources at the centre. To make matters worse, the formula and principles for revenue allocation have been such that they disempowered the ‘original’ owner of oil from which the bulk of the revenue is generated. It was so bad that the derivation principle was almost removed from revenue allocation at the expense of such principles as land mass, population, fiscal efficiency, terrain and internal revenue efforts. These are principles that put the Niger Delta area at a disadvantage compared to other regions of the country. Derivations that would have advanced their cause became as low as 3% under the General Sani Abacha regime and currently stand at 13% under the 1999 Constitution.²⁰ This represents a dimension of the curse of oil.

The Curse of Oil: Environmental Apocalypse in the Niger Delta

Generally, instead of oil serving as a blessing to Nigeria, the reverse has so far been the case. Although the country has generated huge amounts of revenue from oil, totalling about US\$300 billion between 1970 and 2002, years of authoritarianism, chronic opportunism and endemic corruption have debarred its potential benefits from trickling down to the people. Today, more than 70% of Nigerians live in poverty.

The situation is much worse in the Niger Delta, whose people have had to shoulder the burden of oil exploitation on their land. The most devastating effects of oil exploitation on the Niger Delta are the increasing threats of environmental apocalypse in the area, which manifest in various forms. For one thing, due to incessant oil spillages, the people have been deprived of their main sources of livelihood, that is fishing and farming. This is because oil spills have inflicted unimaginable levels of damage on farmlands and rivers such that they can no longer sustain soil nutrients and aquatic resources. Available statistics indicate that between 1976 and 1999, about 3,000 oil spill incidents were reported by the oil companies operating in Nigeria, translating into over 2 million barrels of oil spilled into the country's terrestrial, coastal and offshore marine environment.²¹ A World Bank account also reveals that there were almost 300 oil spills per year between 1991 and 1993 in the Delta and River states alone, which were the main oil-producing states at the time.²²

Apart from oil spills, gas flaring has also been a recurrent problem in the Niger Delta, with devastating effects on the environment, especially the degradation of the air. In 1991 when Nigeria's gross gas production was 31,500,000 standard cubic feet (scf), about 24,240,000 scf of it were flared. This amounts to about 76% of gross production of oil. This is unnecessarily high in comparative terms. For example, it was 21, 20, 19 and 4% in Libya, Saudi Arabia, Iran and Algeria during the same period respectively.²³ By 1995, 76.79% of gross gas production in Nigeria was flared into the air. Consequently, about 30 to 35 million tons of carbon dioxide and an estimated 12 million tons/year of methane, which is very damaging to the environment, are emitted into the

atmosphere. This has serious negative implications for the environment most notably increasing “ambient air degradation” in the oil-producing areas.²⁴

The cumulative effects of oil spills and gas flaring have been devastating. Not only do they destroy environmental resources, but they also constitute health hazards. As noted earlier, farmlands, rivers and their resources have been severely damaged, thereby denying the people their livelihood. This partly explains the high rate of unemployment that characterises the Niger Delta since the people are predominantly farmers and fishermen. At the health level, some of the gaseous pollutants released into the atmosphere such as carbon monoxide, chlorine, nitrogen oxides, sulphur oxides, acid aerosol, beryllium etc, are noted for causing headaches, heart problems, irritation, oedema, dizziness, and gene or neuron problems, depending on the pollutants.²⁵

From the foregoing, it can be seen that the environmental and health impacts of oil on the Niger Delta people have been very negative. The indifferent attitude of other stakeholders in the oil sector – the state and oil multinationals – serves to add another dimension to the frustration and deprivation of the Niger Delta people. It is within this context that oil, rather than being a blessing to the country in general and the Niger Delta in particular, has been a curse. This can further be strengthened by the responses from the contending stakeholders in the Nigerian oil sector.

Responses to Environmental Insecurity

Basically, there are three contending stakeholders in the Nigerian oil sector. These are the oil-bearing communities, the oil companies and the Nigerian state. However, there is a sense in which these stakeholders can be reduced to two. As we will demonstrate presently, what the region has experienced so far is the collusion of two players – oil companies and the Nigerian state – against the oil-bearing communities. The line of demarcation between the oil trans-nationals and the Nigerian state has become increasingly blurred. This is because they are united by a common purpose, that is, capitalist expansionism and the

appropriation of surplus value. This explains why Okechukwu Ibeanu, a professor of political science specialising in environmental politics, asserts that “there is little difference between Shell and the Nigerian state”.²⁶ These stakeholders have responded in various ways to the threats of environmental insecurity in the Niger Delta. By environmental insecurity, we mean “non-military threats that emanate from the social contradictions embedded in the environment”.²⁷ In what follows, we examine the responses of the stakeholders to the environmental insecurity of the Niger Delta.

(a) The Oil-Producing Communities

As we have noted, the oil-producing communities are located mainly in the Niger Delta area, which comprises what is today known as the South-South geo-political zone consisting of six states. These are Rivers, Bayelsa, Delta, Edo, Cross River and Akwa Ibom states. These states constitute the geographical Niger Delta. It is, however, important to note that there also exists what scholars called the political Niger Delta, consisting of the South-South states, as well as Ondo, Abia and Imo states, which have been regarded as part of the catchment areas of the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) because they are also oil-bearing states.²⁸ Nonetheless, we are in this paper primarily concerned with the geographical Niger Delta area, whose people have had to bear the curse of oil exploitation over the years.

At first, the oil-bearing communities responded peacefully to the threats of environmental insecurity emanating from the activities of the oil companies. Such peaceful means included street protests and demonstrations, media and publicity, and litigation.²⁹ However, the failure of these forms of protests to yield the desired result, epitomised by the seeming indifference of the oil companies and the Nigerian state that characterised the decades of the 70s, 80s, and the 90s, may have informed a change of tactics.

Beginning from the 1990s, the struggle for environmental security and the development of the Niger Delta began to assume a frightening dimension as it was effectively radicalised. Although the first attempt at secession in Nigeria was by the Niger Delta in a struggle led by Major Isaac Boro, an Ijaw man, in 1966, it had little or nothing to do with environmental insecurity. In fact, it was

a response to the failure of the colonial government to create a separate state for the Niger Delta people in 1956. On this note, the Ogoni uprising championed by the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) could be taken as the first major attempt to radicalise the struggle. The MOSOP struggle was predicated upon the Ogoni Bill of Rights issued in 1990, whose main demands included the political control of Ogoni affairs by Ogoni people, control and use of a fair proportion of Ogoni economic resources for Ogoni development, and the right to protect the Ogoni environment and economy from further degradation.³⁰ Certainly, these were demands for self-determination and autonomy in the governance of the Niger Delta, which the Nigerian state has resisted very fiercely – but we will come back to this.

The Niger Delta people have been adamant in their resort to the use of violence in spite of harsh responses to their protests by the federal government. On the contrary, several other environmental activists and social movements have emerged in the Niger Delta, and all are demanding redress. There has also been a massive resurgence of ethnic militias in the Delta region, which are responding to the deepening crisis of the environment. Most notable among these are the Egbesu Boys of Africa, the Chicoco Movement, the Ijaw Youth Council, the Federated Niger Delta Ijaw Communities, and the NDPVE.

The activities of these militia groups have been very violent. Their violence has been worsened by the availability of deadly weapons such as AK-47 rifles. Recently in September 2004 before his arrest, Asari Dokubo, leader of the NDPVE, publicly claimed that the NDPVE already had 10,000 men “ready to reclaim the resources of the Niger Delta”.³¹ Recently, too, a relatively new militia group – MEND – was courageous enough to invite a journalist to their base, parading able-bodied men who had been well trained in military tactics and were fully armed, and claiming that they were ready to go to war to redeem the devastation of the Niger Delta due to oil exploitation.³² These are eloquent testimonies to the claim by Professor George J. Frynas, a specialist on oil and environmental politics in Nigeria, that “the Niger Delta is awash with weapons”.³³

Worse still, the Niger Delta has now become a haven for the proliferation of small arms and light weapons, which the militias have put to use on different

occasions. For example, there have been several cases of outright seizure of oil wells, kidnapping of oil workers and hostage takings. In 2006 alone, many such cases have been reported. On 11 January 2006, for instance, MEND took four foreigners hostage. On 23 January, there was an attempt to attack oil installations at Oporoma, Bayelsa state, but it was thwarted by security forces. On 24 January, gunmen dressed in police uniforms killed nine people in a raid on an oil company's offices in Port Harcourt.³⁴ This was followed by a demand for huge amounts of money as ransom before any hostages could be released. As the matter stands now, the Niger Delta constitutes a security risk not only to the country, but the entire international system.³⁵ It has become so critical that some of the oil companies are beginning to contemplate moving out of the area. Julius Berger, a leading German construction company in Nigeria, has begun to pull out of Bayelsa State where it had undertaken some road construction. Unless the government undertakes a serious policy review in order to address the situation, it is only a matter of time before the region becomes another Gulf.

A related dimension of violence in the Niger Delta is inter- and intra-class, group and community conflicts. This may have resulted from the divide and rule tactics of the government in its attempt to manage the impasse. This was precisely the government's approach to the Ogoni uprising when it succeeded in polarising the Ogoni into two, one for and the other against the struggle. For MOSOP, those opposed to the struggle were "vultures", "saboteurs", "collaborators" and sell-outs". But opponents viewed Ken Saro-Wiwa and his MOSOP not as defenders of "an oppressed people but as an opportunist who, after a series of government sinecures belatedly championed a cause that incited violence".³⁶ It was this division that almost crippled the Ogoni struggle, culminating in the eventual hanging of Saro-Wiwa and eight other Ogoni environmental right activists. The trend has not changed and has generated conflict among Niger Delta communities, with a lot of deaths, injuries and wanton destruction of properties into the bargain. Together, these have led to an unprecedented migration of the people to foreign lands as refugees. For instance, in March 1996, the UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) reported that 1,000 Ogonis had fled to Benin since Ogoni Day.³⁷

(b) The Oil Companies

The oil companies too have responded to the challenges of environmental insecurity in the Niger Delta. However, their responses have most often been inadequate to address the problems. Such responses have taken the form of what Nyemutu Roberts referred to as “token pacificism”. That is, the payment of compensation and the initiation of community development projects (CDPs), which according to him, were not really designed to solve the problem but rather to pacify the people. However, it cannot be denied that the oil companies especially Shell have been involved in the payment of compensation, construction and maintenance of water projects, roads, health centres and school buildings, and the funding of vocational training.

The foregoing portrays the oil companies as having a dose of social responsibility in their operations. Such a reading may be misleading. This is because the politics of compensation and CDPs have served in most cases to ambush and neutralise their potential benefits. Studies have shown that not only have oil companies in Nigeria paid compensation at a rate far lower than internationally accepted standards, but they have also attempted to and actually avoided payment of compensation on frivolous grounds. One such escapist strategy is to attribute oil spillages to sabotage for which they may not be culpable. In other instances, they only pay compensation after years of protracted court cases that are usually very costly for the host community. Yet, the CDPs, it has been argued, were largely motivated by the interest of capitalist expansionism and appropriation of surplus value, not the immediate needs of the communities. For example, roads are constructed and/or rehabilitated only where and when it is directly related to these companies’ activities. Even at that, some of the so-called CDPs have been known to be sub-standard and hardly yield additional benefits to the local people.³⁸

Another way in which the oil companies have responded to the deepening crisis of environmental insecurity in the Niger Delta is through public relations, publicity and propaganda. This is usually done through the use of a “third party”, often public relations consultants. It was one of the major approaches that was used following the Ogoni uprising and the attendant

image crisis it generated for the oil companies in the international system. The approach was, therefore, meant to redeem their international image and discredit the Ogoni struggle. As such, there were several publications in the international press that dismissed the claims of the Ogoni and various human rights and environmental organisations.³⁹ Specifically, Shell International reportedly launched a £20 million corporate communication campaign in March 1999 in order to boost the company's tarnished reputation following several public relations disasters. To date, the company maintains a cutting-edge website, and sponsors newspapers advertorials and television programmes among other public relations activities.⁴⁰

Finally, the oil companies have also acted violently with the active connivance of the Nigerian state. This is usually done through the use of security services provided by the state to them to protect oil installations and workers. Beyond those provided by the state, evidence abounds to show that the oil companies also recruit private security companies (PSCs) for security services. While the existence of these forces may not be problematic *per se*, especially given the volatility that has come to characterise the Niger Delta region, their use and misuse to harass, intimidate and suppress environmental rights activists have raised questions about their existence.⁴¹ This development may have been partly responsible for the increasing militarisation of the Niger Delta, with limited possibilities of solving the problem.

(c) The Nigerian State

The responses of the Nigerian state to the environmental and developmental crises of the Niger Delta have followed a similar pattern to its collaborators, the oil companies. This ranges from the peaceful and positive to the negative and violent responses. At the earliest stage, the government's response to the crisis in the Niger Delta was one of indifference, double talk and arm-twisting. As the struggle became fiercer, however, the government adopted other forms of responses. Notable among such options was the creation of separate federal states for the Niger Delta people. The creation of these states brings to the fore Isaac Boro's revolt of 1966, which was a response to the failure of the Nigerian state to heed the Niger Delta's demand for a separate state.

The states of Akwa-Ibom, Delta and Bayelsa were created in 1987, 1991, and 1996 respectively.⁴² The significance of this lies in the fact that the states are the locus of allocation and distribution of national resources in Nigeria. The more states a region has, the more resources it receives from the federal account. The federal government could therefore be said to have responded by increasing financial allocation to the region through state creation. The increase in the revenue allocation formula of derivation to 13% since 1999 also meant more financial allocation to the Niger Delta. For example, available statistics reveal that between 29 May 1999 and 31 December 2005, the Niger Delta received a total of ₦1,767,500,000.00 as federal allocation to the coastal states of the region. The breakdown is such that Delta, Rivers, Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Ondo, Edo and Cross Rivers States received ₦384.4 billion, ₦357.5 billion, ₦313.6 billion, ₦285.6 billion, ₦165.2 billion, ₦131.5 billion and ₦126.7 billion respectively.⁴³ Indeed, it is against the background of this increasing financial allocation to the region vis-à-vis the excruciating human conditions prevalent in the area that calls are now being made that the problems may not be with the oil companies and/or the Nigerian state, but the managers of the Niger Delta. This conception has some merit and raises questions about the quality of leadership in the region.

The state has also responded through public relations, media and publicity, and propaganda. This approach was dominant during the era of military rule especially under General Abacha following the Ogoni crisis. George Frynas documents in detail how the Nigerian government in the 1990s reportedly paid for advertisements in the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*, using a public relations (PR) firm – Van Kloberg and Associates – known for improving the image of countries involved in massive human rights abuses. This intensified after the hanging of Ken Saro-Wiwa and his kinsmen when Abacha reportedly spent about US\$5 million on PR firms in the United States (US).⁴⁴ After the Odi massacre in 1999, where about 2,000 people were killed, the government also resorted to media campaigns and propaganda to justify its actions through newspaper advertisements and television programmes.

Beyond this, the Nigerian state has also responded through institutional designs for capacity building and popular empowerment in the Niger Delta. The earliest of this was the establishment of the Niger Delta Development

Board (NDDB) in 1961 to oversee the developmental needs of the area. However, the first comprehensive institutional response to the Niger Delta was the establishment of the Oil Mineral Producing Areas Development Commission (OMPADEC) in 1992. This was followed by the NDDC in 2000. While these bodies each have specific objectives, their general concern was to tackle the underdevelopment of the region. Specifically, through OMPADEC, the government sought to increase financial contributions to the oil producing areas from 1.5 to 3% of government revenue. The major task of OMPADEC was to administer judiciously such allocations and coordinate development projects in the area. Unfortunately, the phenomenon of corruption, a major feature of governance in Nigeria, hampered the effectiveness of OMPADEC. In quick succession, its first two leaders – Albert K. Horsfall and Professor Eric Opia – were unceremoniously dismissed for corrupt deals. There were also internal crises among the states of the Niger Delta as to which state should produce the chairman.⁴⁵ All these largely served to limit the reach of OMPADEC.

The forgoing explains why OMPADEC was discarded and replaced with the NDDC, whose mandate was basically to address the environmental and developmental concerns of the Niger Delta. President Obasanjo had promised the Niger Delta people to find a lasting solution to the problem of the area as part of his campaign promises when he visited the region. True to his promise, he proposed a Bill for the establishment of the NDDC, the passage of which led to its establishment. For all intents and purposes, the NDDC seems better equipped in terms of its enabling law, funding and control. This has been demonstrated by the fact that the NDDC, despite its limitations, has performed better than all its predecessors, going by the number of projects it executed between 2002 and 2003. During this period, the NDDC executed a total of 810 projects out of which 495 had been commissioned as at 2004.⁴⁶ That is not to say that the crises of the Niger Delta have been adequately redressed. Though the NDDC is well funded compared to its predecessor, it has consistently complained of a shortage of finances to implement its programmes.

The Nigerian state has also responded through violent means. This includes the promulgation of draconian decrees such as the one promulgated by the Abacha regime prohibiting the Ogoni people's demand for the right

to self-determination as articulated in the Ogoni Bill of Rights. The decree criminalised any disturbances of oil production activities as acts of treason attracting capital punishment.⁴⁷ It was this decree that Ken Saro-Wiwa and his MOSOP colleagues defied by proceeding with a mass rally and other threats on 13 January 1993, which ultimately led to the hanging of Saro-Wiwa and eight of his kinsmen. Apart from draconian decrees, there were a number of other excesses on the part of the Nigerian state. The use of state terrorism stands out as the most conspicuous. Here, the state operates through security agents, including the military, to cage all forms of resistance in the Niger Delta. In some instances, this resulted in massive arrests, torture and the incarceration of environmental activists, thus keeping Nigerians under perpetual siege. For example, in April 1994, the military government of Abacha came up with “Operation Order 4194” meant “to restore law and order in Ogoni land” as a result of the uprising. The operation consisted of about 406 police and navy officers, who effectively occupied Ogoni land.⁴⁸ The situation has not really changed for the better, even with the advent of civilian democratic rule in 1999. It is horrifying to note that no sooner had the Obasanjo government come to power in 1999, than it deployed the military to Odi, a small village in Bayelsa State with a population of about 15,000. President Obasanjo, in what has been described as “the largest deployment of troops since the Biafran War”,⁴⁹ deployed troops to Odi in November 1999 to retaliate against the alleged killing of security personnel deployed to the area for security purposes by the villagers. In that expedition, more than 2,000 people were killed, many more injured and unquantifiable resources (including buildings) were destroyed. Eyewitness accounts point to the extent of the destruction as devastating. Senator Chuba Okadigbo, the then President of the Nigerian Senate, visited the scene a week after the massacre and stated: “The facts speak for themselves... There is no need for speech because there is nobody to speak with.”⁵⁰

Claude Ake, a political economist, says it all when he describes the reckless use of the military in the Niger Delta as the “militarisation of commerce” and “privatisation of the State”.⁵¹

From a historical viewpoint, the resort to violence by the state has not helped matters. Rather, it has worsened them. The people seem to derive more

conviction and inspiration from the violent acts of the state and develop corresponding responses accordingly. This may have accounted for the vicious cycle of armed ethnic militias and conflicts in the Niger Delta, with devastating effects not only on governance of the region, but the entire country.

Democracy, Squandering of Hopes and Rising Tension

The birth of democracy in Nigeria in May 1999 had raised hopes for the effective resolution of the Niger Delta crisis. Such hopes are not misplaced, given the fact that democracy is generally considered to be naturally imbued with conflict management devices such as power sharing, expansion of the public and political space for democratic discussions, deliberation and consensus building.⁵² Added to this was the fact that President Obasanjo, as part of his electioneering campaigns, had promised to fully engage the Niger Delta's problem during his visit to the area in 1999. And true to his word, he established the NDDC in 2000 to take charge of the problems of the Niger Delta. In fairness, the NDDC seems better empowered in terms of financial resources, enabling law and regulatory mechanisms than its predecessor, OMPADEC.⁵³

Since the inauguration of democracy in 1999, at least two major opportunities to fundamentally address the Niger Delta problems have emerged. Unfortunately, both were squandered by the principal actors in these events. The first was the Oputa Panel set up by President Obasanjo in 2001 to revisit all cases of human rights abuses under successive military regimes and reconcile all aggrieved Nigerians. This, under an ideal situation, was a step in the right direction. As it turned out, however, the reconciliatory process with the Niger Delta suffered a deadly blow when Pa Jim Beeson Wiwa, the 96 year old father of Ken Saro-Wiwa, refused to appear before the Oputa Panel because, according to him, "my mind was not peaceful. I will not appear before the Oputa Panel because that will not bring back my son for me."⁵⁴ His persistent agonies, six years after the hanging of his son, may have remained so deep because the state had failed to create a conducive environment for the healing of the wound that naturally accompanies such losses. As an informed commentator argued,

“the fact that his body had not been released meant that the long process of healing and coming to terms with death could not even begin”⁵⁵

Logically, the federal government could have released the corpse of Ken Saro-Wiwa and other Ogoni activists hanged with him long before setting up the panel, if they were sincere with the Oputa Panel. The government should have been able to gauge the likely positive impact of such a gesture from the symbolic burial for Ken Saro-Wiwa in April 2000 by his kinsmen. Despite the use of open and subtle threats by the government to frustrate the idea, Ken Saro-Wiwa’s symbolic coffin was reportedly buried under the Ogoni flag. The presence of over 100,000 Ogonis at ceremonies during the week was an eloquent testimony to Saro-Wiwa’s popularity. Yet, it took another four years for the government to release his bones to the family for burial.⁵⁶ This, coupled with the attitude of some retired generals, particularly Ibrahim Babangida, who contributed to the deepening crisis of Nigerian federalism with his poor handling of oil proceeds and by extension the Niger Delta crisis, dampened public expectations of the panel.

The second opportunity came with the convening of the NPRC between March and August 2005 to address the national question in Nigeria, of which the Niger Delta issue is one of the most prominent. Unfortunately, again, the NPRC could not reach consensus on the Niger Delta question because the Niger Delta delegates pressed for 50% derivation, subject to an annual upward review after five years. Their counterparts especially from the North were not ready to concede anything more than 17-19%. The issue became so explosive that the NPRC was put on hold for almost three weeks because of a walk-out staged by delegates from the Niger Delta. In fact, delegates to the NPRC, after a series of negotiations, intrigues and twists, could not reconcile their differences, such that it only reconvened to wind up. That signalled the centrality of the Niger Delta issue to the national question in Nigeria. Thus, the expectations that the NPRC would help to provide acceptable answers to the national questions were, once again, squandered. This may have also served to strengthen the resolve of the Niger Delta people never to accept what they considered as injustice engineered by northern conspiracy.⁵⁷

Apart from the opportunities discussed above, some other events have also contributed to the escalation of violence in the Niger Delta. First was the litigation filed by the federal government against the oil-producing states in the wake of increasing agitation for resource control and the onshore/offshore dichotomy. The court ruled in favour of the federal government, a finding that the South-South states considered a betrayal on the part of the president. Second were the arrest of Asari Dokubo, leader of the NDPVF, and the impeachment of Governor Diepreye Alamieyeseigha of Bayelsa State. These acts were considered to be an assault on the Niger Delta struggle. The question of South-South presidency in the 2007 general elections, which up to now seems uncertain, would appear to have added another frustrating dimension to the crisis, all, fuelling the “new” violence in the region.

The squandering of these opportunities, coupled with subsequent developments as well as excruciating poverty and general conditions of living, accounts for the new forms and character of violence in the Niger Delta. Today, the Delta has become more militarised than ever before. The spate of hostage taking is unprecedented. The phenomenon of oil bunkering has also assumed the dimensions of a scourge. This has become so endemic that about 10% of Nigeria’s oil production is now said to be going into illegal bunkering controlled by local politicians who hire armed militias to look after their interests. While one may sound counterfactual, it is not unlikely that the returns on such illegal deals have been or could be used to finance the various militia groups in the region. More worrisome is the fact that most of these militias no longer operate in secrecy. The NDPVF and MEND have been openly vocal, with their leaders issuing threats to the state and claiming responsibility for some violent acts. These are indicative that all is not well with Niger Delta, nay the Nigerian state.

The Next Gulf?

In view of the above analysis, which depicts a really gloomy picture of the Niger Delta, can we comfortably label the region as the next Gulf? In point of fact, events happening in the Niger Delta today are comparable to those that

precipitated and sustained the Gulf war – oil politics. The actors are also similar, especially given the involvement of Western interests particularly the US and Britain. Already, the US, which receives one-third of Nigerian oil production amounting to about 6% of US oil imports, and Britain that is said not to be directly affected by events in the Niger Delta, have begun to express their worries over the militarism in the region. They have complained about “supply disruptions and rise in oil prices”.⁵⁸ With the unending tension in the Middle East, chances are high that the Nigerian oil sector may gain increasing attraction from the US. If this happens, then the Niger Delta may be on the verge of explosion as the sole superpower could do anything to secure this oil.

Be that as it may, and whatever the depth of the contradictions, such may not be enough to warrant the emergence of another Gulf in the Niger Delta. We envisage a situation whereby the government and the oil companies may have to come to terms with prevailing realities and step up their developmental and environmental agenda in the Niger Delta. That is not to say that this will automatically erase violence from the area. In fact, across time and space, oil-bearing communities are known for violent dispositions and instability.⁵⁹ For this reason, the Niger Delta will continue to generate tensions so long as oil exploitation continues to take place there. However, this is not enough to conclude that the Niger Delta would be the next Gulf. What will happen depends on the adjustments made to the politics of oil by the major stakeholders in the oil sector. Since continuing violence is not in the best interests of major players in the Niger Delta, it will not be out of place to expect that positive adjustments that will foster security, peace and development will be adopted.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In this paper, we have attempted re-interrogate the deepening crisis of environmental insecurity in the Niger Delta, which has necessitated the regime of violence that is prevalent in the region. This has become more devastating and worrisome under the nascent democracy. The trend, form and character of

violence in the region only attest to the failure of state and corporate responses to the problem. There is therefore a need for a fundamental overhaul of such responses because, as the Niger Delta is, it constitutes a serious security risk not only to Nigeria, but to the entire international system. To prevent the emergence of the next Gulf from the Niger Delta, some policy options are considered to be very pertinent. These include:

- 1 Addressing the root causes of the Niger Delta problem. These basically are the desire for resource control, some degree of autonomy and economic development. Such a policy framework requires fundamental constitutional amendments to concede a greater degree of autonomy to the states of the federation especially in terms of mining rights and decentralisation of power.
- 2 There is a need to increase the financial allocation to the Niger Delta to address the environmental and developmental concerns of the region. This can be done through an upward review of the 13% derivation to at least 20%. However, adequate regulatory measures should be instituted to monitor the use of such resources given the prevalent culture of corruption that has come to typify the area.
- 3 The concept and practice of corporate social responsibility should be regulated through a legal framework and the oil companies enjoined to participate such in all their dealings along international minimum standards.
- 4 All stakeholders should eschew the violent option in their responses to the situation. Rather, democratic means such as popular consultation, persuasion, discussion and consensus building should be encouraged. This requires a great deal of social mobilisation at all levels by the mass media and civil society.
- 5 Youth empowerment schemes are very important. Issues such as youth forums, employment, education, capacity building and related measures should therefore be accorded the utmost priority.
- 6 The prevalence of poverty in the Niger Delta has also contributed to the problem. There is a need to thoroughly engage this through poverty eradication programmes. The National Economic Empowerment and

Development Strategy (NEEDS) should be strengthened and employed in this regard.

- 7 The government and oil companies should devise regulatory mechanisms to ensure that allocations and compensation to the oil-bearing communities actually get to the people. It has been alleged that much of the allocation and compensation money paid currently ends up in the private accounts of the state managers.
- 8 Above all, Nigeria should intensify its ongoing efforts to diversify the national economy. This is the only option, which in the long run can reduce the country's reliance on oil, making it less sensitive to national income and development. If this happens, associated tensions are bound to nose-dive. Only a sustainable focus on good governance at all levels, that is efficient and development-oriented, can make these options practicable.

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