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## **Oil Exploration and Ethnic Militia activities in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria** *(Pp. 56-67)*

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### **Abstract**

*Before the discovery of oil in the Niger Delta region, agriculture was the dominant source of livelihood of the people in the region. The exploration and exploitation of crude oil has resulted in environmental degradation, contamination of soil and waters, pollution, loss of aquatic life and Bio diversity, etc. The above conditions have led to the emergence of Ethnic Militia who continues to struggle for the emancipation and development of the region. The activities of these militia groups have transformed from the struggle for emancipation and development of the region to criminality in the oil rich region of Nigeria. The study is an attempt to show how the failure on the part of the multinational corporations and the Federal Government to mitigate the consequences of their activities and develop the region given the fact that the region contributes a huge proportion of the National income of the Nigerian State has led to conflict in the region. This paper will also demonstrate how adequate mitigation measures and Development Projects and Programme will help to reduce conflict in the region.*

### **Introduction**

The Nigerian State is Africa's most populous nation and also the largest oil producing nation in the African continent. There are two undisputable facts

about the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. Firstly, the region is strategically important to both the domestic and international economies. Secondly, it is a region of great wealth as well as poverty. The region lies over one of the biggest oil reserve on planet earth with over 34 billion barrels of black gold. In 2005, Nigeria produced 2.6 million barrels of crude oil per day. 2.3 million barrels of this was exported making Nigeria the sixth largest net exporter of crude oil in the world (EIA, 2005b 2006). The oil boom of the early 1970s in Nigeria led to the economy depending solely on oil. The revenue from crude oil accounted for about 40 percent of the country's GDP and more than 90 percent of her foreign exchange earnings (EIA, 2005a).

The large oil resources are concentrated in the Niger Delta region of the Nigerian State. There is a total of 36 billion barrels and about 150 trillion cubic feet of natural gas reserve (EIA, 2006). The Niger Delta region accommodates over twenty million people from over twenty ethnic groups, with over 1,600 autonomous communities distributed in 9 of the 36 States of Nigeria, Delta, Bayelsa, Rivers, Akwa Ibom, Ondo, Abia and Imo States. This region can be described as the engine room that propels the economic growth and development of the Nigerian State which is a monocultural nation with sole reliance on crude oil and gas.

A large number of these autonomous communities host both local and multinational oil companies. Crude oil production in this region dominated largely by Transnational oil companies including Chevron, Texaco, Royal Dutch Shell, Exxon Mobil, Total and Agip. These Transnational oil companies operate a joint venture with the Federal Government of Nigeria, represented by the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC) and its subsidiaries in which the Federal Government of Nigeria hold an average of 60 percent equity shares.

The Nigerian State has experienced a number of booms in alternation between several natural resources. There was the boom period associated with exploitation of agricultural cash crops such as palm oil, timber, rubber etc. (Olatubosun, 1975).

The emergence of an oil dependent economy by the Nigerian State in the 1970s led to the systematic neglect of other sectors of the economy particularly the agricultural sector which was the major contributor to Nigeria's National Income. In spite of the country's vast oil resources, the world estimates that over 80 percent of the revenue accruing from oil benefit about 1 percent of the population (EIA, 2005).

In spite of the huge oil wealth, Nigeria is ranked 159<sup>th</sup> out of 177 countries on its Human Development Index and reports that more 70 percent of Nigerian live on less than US\$1 per day with high rate of inflation, crime rates and unemployment. (UN, 2006). The expectations surrounding the discovery of oil has dwindled largely because the general livelihood of the people has not been positively affected by the discovery of oil. The multiplier effect that should accrue from the huge revenue from oil are not felt by the people. Identifying of needs by the people and participation of the people in the process of meeting the needs is an important ingredient towards actualizing the needs of the people. A visit to communities in the region will show the level of exploitation, marginalization and neglect of the region. More significantly is the spate of activism which has characterized the region. These reactions are traceable to the steady neglect, marginalization and exploitation of the region as a result of oil prospecting activities in the region. Parts of this was transformed into a resilient subculture of violence by ethnic militia groups violence and rebelliousness, which are a clear manifestation of social equilibrium and inequality that is inimical to justice, fair play and development.

The network of creeks, streams and thick mangrove vegetation provides an operational base for a plethora ethnic militia groups with different goals ranging from freedom fighting and Nationalism to activities bordering on criminality.

This paper therefore, set to highlight how the failure of multinational corporations and the Nigerian State to mitigate the consequences of exploration activities has led to the emergence of ethnic militia groups with varying goals which included freedom fighting and Nationalism and criminality. Deriving from the above, the paper will also demonstrate how adequate mitigation measures and development projects and Programmes will help in reducing conflict in the region.

### **Conceptual framework for analysis**

The struggle for emancipation and development of the Niger Delta region lies at the core of the Niger Delta struggle. However, this struggle is not yet directed towards secession from the Nigerian State but merely a struggle against neglect, environmental degradation, marginalization and exploitation which has led to frustration. In examining the activities of the militia groups occasioned by the exploration of crude oil and exploitation of the environment and the people, the paper explores the FRUSTRATION –

**AGGRESSION HYPOTHESIS.** The hypothesis posits that people are pushed into aggressive behaviour by drive influenced by frustration (Dollard et al 1939)

The above explanation can further be explained from two points in relation to activities of militia groups in the Niger Delta due to exploration activities and exploitation of the physical environment and people of the Niger Delta. The first point is that frustration leads to some form of aggression. This may not take place in all situations since the level of tolerance differs from one group to another. Furthermore, the magnitude of the perceived stumbling block is a function of frustration projection, given the relative strength of the Nigerian State in the case of the militia groups and government face off which often results in frustration displacement. As a consequence therefore, the activities of militia group are directed at expatriates working with multinational companies, Nigerians in some cases and oil installations in the region who should ordinarily not be affected (Hewstone and Stroebe, 2001).

The second point is that aggression is a consequence of frustration, the socio-economic hardship, perceived marginalization and inequity in the distribution of the nation's wealth which a large proportion comes from the Niger Delta region and yet poverty is everywhere in the region. This is expressed in violent activities by militia groups in the region.

In other to substantiate the violent activities carried out by militia groups, three important issue will be raised here. The first is why do militia activities occur and sustained? How is the image of this militia activities constructed and maintained? And can these activities by the militia be justified. Answers can be provided for the above questions as follows.

The activities of militia groups occur as a result of perceived marginalization and pauperization of the region provide adequate answer to the first question. The second question is answered from the view point that this image is created in the minds of the people and therefore gives them a mind set. The answer to the third question is that the activities of the militia groups are justified to the extent that the activities are carried out as a last resort toward making the government sit up and address the issue and that such activities do not boarder on criminality. Taking the activities of militia groups as criminals is a diversionary tactics by the State in diverting the attention of the exploited.

The problem of environmental pollution or degradation, socio-economic closure, deprivation and such other problems are unlikely to attract the same degree of moral condemnation that attends militia activities (Munae and McLanghlin, 2001).

### **Exploration, exploitation and the emergence of militia activities in the Niger Delta**

The year 1956 witnessed the beginning of oil exploration in the Niger Delta region. This region is one of the most blessed in the world in terms of both human and natural resources. Nigeria is the world's 11<sup>th</sup> largest producer of oil with over two million barrels into the international market per day. All Nigeria's oil and gas resources is found in the Niger Delta region of the Nigerian. This therefore makes the region strategic to national aspiration with consequences of environmental degradation in efforts to extract oil and gas to the maximum.

The indiscriminate manner in which exploration activities were carried out coupled with the lack of concern for the environment has seriously affected the region. Osuoka, 2003 opined that all stages of oil exploration results in the destruction of the natural environment and the livelihood of the people of the region depend on the land, creeks and waters of the Niger Delta for survival. The above coupled with with incessant oil spills and blow outs resulting from over-aged and poorly maintained well heads, pipelines and other facilities make Nigeria's oil field to record the highest number of spill incident globally (ICG, 2006b; Agbu, 2005; Osuoka, 2003).

The increasing rate of marginalization, deprivation, perceived insensitivity on the part of the State, environmental degradation and the failure of State and multinational corporations interventionists effort at ameliorating the socio-economic conditions of the inhabitants of the region. Before the advent of violence in the Niger Delta, there were however, peaceful non-violent approach towards redressing the problems of the region. From the later part of 1960s the people in the region have peacefully engaged the Nigerian State for the development of the region without much success. At inception of the struggle, they have channeled their demand through several non-violent community based organizations. Through these organizations, the oil producing States have demanded greater participation in the control and management of oil resources. Their demand includes the following:

1. The restoration of the principle of derivation as the criteria for the allocation of oil revenue;

2. Demand for increase in oil revenue allocation from the current 13 percent to 25 percent which subsequently graduate to 50 percent;
3. And the abrogation of all repressive and obnoxious legislation such as the Petroleum Act, Land Use Decree etc. that have concentrated too much power at the centre and at the time disempowered the people of the Niger Delta (Torulagha, 2007). Failures of several years of peaceful engagement heralded a violent phase of the struggle.

This situation has resulted in the reinforcement of the option of violence as against peaceful means. This is manifested in the increasing rate of violence which is manifested by incidence of kidnapping, vandalization of oil installations, the occupation of oil sites and seizure of facilities, the proliferation of arms and the emergence of militia groups who have combated the State.

The activities of ethnic militia groups in the Niger Delta occasioned by the frustration characterizing the region have transformed from struggle against deprivation and marginalization to criminality. Frustration leads to some form of aggression. The socio-economic conditions of the people of this region coupled with lack of political will to find possible solution to the problem of the region by the Nigerian State, militia groups have mounted several violent attacks on the Nigerian State. The state of insecurity occasioned by the activities of ethnic militia of oil exploration activities in the Niger Delta has affected the socio-economic well being and political stability of the Nigerian State.

Sustained exploration and production activities in the region without strategic and holistic efforts aimed at managing the impacts of these activities have resulted in undesirable consequences, as a result, the region has become an unstable area in the Nigerian State where access to vie revenue has become a source of violence. (Globasecurity. org 2006)

### **Ethnic militias: what are they?**

Ethnic militias can be described as youth based groups that are formed for the purpose of promoting and protecting parochial interests of their ethnic nationalities whose activities sometimes transforms into the use of violence. Ethnic militia groups in the Nigerian State are not rebel movements. This is so because their aim is not to capture political power, rather they serve as pressure groups that seek to influence the structure of power in the Nigerian

State through their activities. Furthermore, they are involved in drawing the attention of the world to the deteriorating material condition or political deprivation and perceived marginalization of their group or social environment. The violence exhibited by militia groups form part of the reproduction of the culture of militarization that have been put in place by the Nigerian State (Adejumobi, 2002)

Duverger, (1976) sees militias as:

a kind of private army whose members are enrolled on military lives, one subjected to the same discipline and same training as a soldier like them wearing uniforms and badges, headdress by a band and flags, and like them ready to meet the enemy with weapons in physical combat

They are never mobilized on a permanent basis and also not maintained full time by their organization. Moreover he noted that two categories are distinguished among militias namely, those who may be referred to as a kind of “active army” whose are ever ready for confrontation and others who are described more or less like reserve: Furthermore, he observed that the military character of the militia appears not only in its composition but also of its structure which is usually “based on very small groups which built up pyramids to form larger and larger units” .

Ethnic militia groups emerged in the Nigerian State in the 1990s when the nation was in torment of a vicious military dictatorship. The character of these regimes deepened the contradictions and crisis of the Nigerian State, resulted in the rise of ethnic militia groups as one of the major consequences of that process. There are three salient features of these regimes that reinforced militarism and promoted primordial loyalties in the Nigerian State. First is the phenomenon of personal rule and the high concentration of power perpetuated by them.(Adejumobi, 2000). The period witnessed inter ethnic religious and communal conflicts from the North to the South. The import of this is that ethnic boundary and consciousness became more profound specifically during the Babangida and Abacha regimes

The second salient feature of those regimes is the contrivance of the public sphere for social expression and political action. Both the Babangida and Abacha regimes were repressive and sought to deal with any group that opposed them.

The final feature to the rise of ethnic militia groups under these regimes was the issue of marginalization and social deprivation that became rife in the country especially for the ethnic minorities of the Niger Delta region. The oil which is the mainstay of the economy of the Nigerian State is sourced from the Niger Delta, the region was characterized by poverty and the people live in squalor. The general perception here is that these marginalization was related to their minority status and that oil from the region was used to develop dominant ethnic groups. The problem associated with this region has been well documented (Civil Rights Organization, 1996; Ekire, 2001; Obi, 2002; Human Right Watch, 1999 and Osaghae, 1995).

The response of the Nigerian State to the conflict in the Niger Delta has been to militarize the region by stationing army in the oil producing communities with the intention of keeping at bay restive youths, individuals and associations to ensure free flow of oil to the Nigerian State. Driven by this frustration some groups in the oil rich communities of the Niger Delta resorted to armed reaction in self defence and struggle for resource control. Several militant youth groups emerged, while the existing no violent groups established youth wings. The objective was to counter the violence of the Nigerian State and seek redress to deprivation and marginalization. It is within this context that ethnic militia groups emerged and the region witnessed their proliferation. Between 1990 and 2009 there have been dozens of militia group dotting all communities in the Niger Delta region.

### **Challenges and the way forward**

The transformation of the Nigeria State is dependent on the sustained flow of oil revenue from the Niger Delta region which is characterized by conflict resulting from exploration activities and exploitation. Between 2006 and 2010, intense armed conflict characterizing the region has paralyzed oil exploration activities leading to huge drop in the volume of oil revenue accruing to the Nigerian State. It has become imperative therefore, that the resolution of the Niger Delta must as a matter of necessity precede any objective and meaningful reform that could turn around the Nigerian economy.

It is important here to highlight some important underlying factors of the conflict in the Niger Delta. These factors include:

- The lack of strategic planning for exploration and production of oil. The sustenance of oil exploration and production activities in the Niger Delta without putting in place a strategic and holistic plan for

managing the impact of such activities has in the past resulted in undesirable consequences.

- Shrinking of the environmental space for farming activities which is the main source of livelihood for the people of this region has worsened the prevalence of poverty, unemployment and general hopelessness in midst of plenty. Poverty rate has heightened in the region.
- There is also the issue of regional imbalance and skewed resource allocation because the oil revenue is shared to all States in the federation, any arrangement to commit more resources to develop the Niger Delta has to be at the expense of other regions.

The Nigerian State has not been passive to the conflict in the Niger Delta, successive regimes have taken steps at addressing the conflict situation in the Niger Delta. It is worthy to note that the response of the Nigerian State to the crisis in the Niger Delta has not yielded any positive results in the past rather it has aggravated the situation. There have been instances of State violent repression against oil producing communities which include; the Egbema crisis (1989 – 1991); Oburu violence (1989); Umuechem massacre (November, 1990); Bonny tragedy (1992); Egi-Obaji mayhem (1994); Tai-Biara (Ogoni massacre (1994); Ubima tragedy (1995); Odi massacre and the recent Gbaramatu tragedy (2009) (Raji, 1998: 116; Eteng, 1996: 140; Ovwasa, 1999: 94)

In the recognition of the place of the crisis in the Niger Delta as key impediment to the Nigeria's economic transformation and development, government recently has put in place a number of strategic steps to address the conflict in the Niger Delta.

- The recent amnesty deal for regional insurgents. In 2009 the Federal Government of Nigeria declared amnesty from criminal prosecution to militants with a promise to rehabilitate and get them on course through Programmes for integration though recent events points to the likelihood of failure of the amnesty programmes. The amnesty programme will achieve the desired results if properly managed.
- Restructuring of the oil industry; this has become necessary in order to give the oil producing communities by amending the outdated

1969 Petroleum Act through the processed Petroleum Industry Bill (PIB) to increase local participation and the empowerment of local communities through equity.

- Focus on the development of the Niger Delta. The creation of the Niger Delta Development Commission in 2001 to accelerate sustainable development of the region. There is also the creation of the Ministry of the Niger Delta in 2009.

The recent attempt by the Nigerian State to find lasting solutions to the Niger Delta crisis would achieve the desired goals if properly implemented.

### **Conclusion**

The worries and demands of ethnic militia groups have basically revolved around some fundamental issues bordering on poverty, bad governance perceived marginalization and neglect, ineffective corporate-community relationship environmental degradation, minority status in the Federation, inequality in distribution of the nation's wealth and underdevelopment.

The Nigerian State needs to go beyond criminalizing militia groups by branding them as "disgruntled and misguided elements, or terrorist organizations and militarization of the region rather than looking at the main issues that form the basis for their activities.

This paper has examined the fundamental issues that formed the basis for the formation and activities of ethnic militias. The problems facing the Niger Delta region have been well documented in this paper. Fundamentally, it is hoped that the recent lofty programmes involving huge financial resources part of which has been harnessed from the region will be put into proper use by the agencies for implementation.

Finally therefore, the submission of this paper is that deceit, repression and the use of force by the Nigerian State will not help in addressing the conflict in the Niger Delta.

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