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Youths, Violence and the Collapse of Public Order in the Niger Delta of Nigeria

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Background

An unbroken span of almost fifteen years of military rule, from December 1984 to May 1999, ended with the inauguration of Nigeria's Fourth Republic and a democratically elected civilian administration under President Olusegun Obasanjo. Even after this long overdue transition, the pervasive effects of prolonged military rule remained evident in virtually every part of the Nigerian society. Economically, the military presided over a merciless looting of public resources. The signs of this were the emergence of 'overnight millionaires', an uncontrollable inflation, huge public and external indebtedness and the near-collapse of the national economy. Politically, military rule led to the shrinking of the space for any popular expression and democratic participation in governance. The military tinkered endlessly with every transition programme so as to exclude the radical opposition elements with whom they felt so uncomfortable. There was a deep and pervasive mentality of force, as authoritarian social behaviour percolated the order that had previously characterised social transactions in the civil society.

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The present political dispensation has not improved the state of governance associated with several years of military rule. Significant aspects of this phenomenon have endured and assumed even worse forms in some cases. There has been a dangerous resurgence of violent conflicts over ethnicity, religion and resources, with the attendant insecurity. The violent conflict in the Niger Delta has been in many ways a microcosm of the wider crisis that bedeviled Nigeria in the heyday of military rule. Such conflict among the oil-producing communities in the Niger Delta reflect the widespread collapse of public order in the country. The conflict attests to the depth of social frustration and anger harboured by the oil communities, directed first against elements they consider to have sold out communal heritage; secondly, against the oil companies, whose years of exploration and production have so far yielded little positive development; and thirdly, against the 'distant' Nigerian State, more concerned over what it accumulates than caring about the proverbial goose that lays the golden egg. Like most of the violent conflicts in contemporary Nigeria, those in the oil-rich Niger Delta reveal the inherent weakness of the State institutions. These cannot effectively resolve social conflicts. The State has demonstrated strong preference for military coercion to suppress militant groups, whose activities threaten oil production in the Niger Delta, the country's main source of foreign exchange earnings.

The primary focus of this paper is on the role of youths in the violent conflicts plaguing the Niger Delta oil region of Nigeria since the early 1990s when a small but homogeneous ethnic group, the Ogonis, embarked on a mass protest against an alliance between the Nigerian State and foreign oil companies, especially Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC)[1]. The Ogonis accused them of polluting

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[1] Shell is *primus inter pares* among major foreign oil companies and a few indigenous establishments, such as Chevron Nigeria Limited, Exxon Mobil, National Agip Oil Company and Texaco. SPDC alone has an estimated 92 producing fields, 86 flow...

their environment, marginalising and disfranchising the local community. Around the same period, several non-Ogoni communities of the Niger Delta, such as the Ijaws, Nembe, Itsekiri, Urhobo, Okrika and Kalabari, also engaged in mass political protests and civil disobedience over similar issues. The experiences of youths in the Ogoni and other Niger Delta ethnic communities have been largely ignored in literature, even though there is evidence that they played an important role. This paper offers a critical examination of their political activities. What were the main grievances of youths in the Niger Delta oil communities? How did violent youth protests affect security and stability in the Delta? How did the State and oil multinationals respond to the challenge to security posed by youth violence there? Finally, how did the crisis in the Niger Delta influence discussion about security, violence and public order in the Delta and in Nigeria in general?

This paper first presents an overview of community strife among the oil communities in the Delta. This provides the basis for understanding the involvement of youths in grassroots politics and violence in the area. I then examine the security implications of the violent conflict in the Delta and the various reactions of government and the multinational oil companies. I conclude by putting forward some recommendations for resolving the violent youth crisis in the Delta.

Causes and Dimensions of Violent Conflicts in the Niger Delta

Opinions do not greatly differ about the factors behind the surge of violent civil conflicts in the Niger Delta area in Nigeria. Naanem, (1995:65-75) identified an acute scarcity of land, because of the ever-expanding oil production activity, degradation of land and water by oil pollution and creation of oil-related infrastructure like refineries, fertiliser and petrochemical plants, as causes of violence among oil

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stations and 6,200 kilometres of oil pipelines. See *Vanguard Newspapers* (Lagos), 2-4-98, p. 13

communities[2]. Welch (1995:635) also argued that 'communal pressures that have characterised the Niger delta and many other parts of Nigeria are not only matters of ethnic self-determination but also complex expressions of economic and political disparities'. Warning that the present situation in the Delta is 'serious, complicated and explosive', Van Dessel[3] (1995:3) suggested that 'too many promises and disappointments in the past have exhausted the patience and confidence of the people and the carrying capacity of the Niger Delta ecosystem' (p. 29). Alfred Ilenre, the General Secretary of EMIROAF, an ethnic minority rights group active in the Niger Delta, also noted that: ' ...Nigeria has not at all been fair to the people of the Niger Delta. The suffering of the people, in spite of the enormous wealth that is got from their area, is inexplicable. That is why violence has erupted all over'. According to him, youths were up in arms because of the seeming failure of non-violent action (p. 23). A prominent leader and owner of one of the few indigenous oil companies in Nigeria, Chief Itsueli, presented an alarming picture of the multiplier effect of youth militancy in the oil basin. In his opinion, boundary disputes and clashes had led to an alarming acquisition of sophisticated firearms and the creation of private militia in oil communities, where youths became well armed and violent. He warned that if the substantive issues arousing discontent in the oil delta region were not addressed, the youths might graduate to higher levels of criminality in their immediate neighbourhood or wherever they felt oil money

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[2] On the role played by scarcity of resources, especially land, in the resurgence of mass-based conflicts and revolutions, see Manus I. Midlarsky, 'Scarcity and Inequality: Prologue to the Onset of Mass Revolution', Journal of Conflict Resolution, 26: 1, March 1982, pp. 3-38.

[3] Dessel joined Shell in 1990 as a biologist. After working for two years in The Netherlands, Dessel was assigned to Shell Nigeria where he served for more than two years as environmental adviser (Head, Environmental Studies). He resigned in December 1994 because his 'professional and personal integrity was at stake', p. 5.

generated from their backyards had been invested[4]. Another community leader, Chief Mala Sasine, a lawyer and traditional ruler of Igbogere in Bayelsa State, concluded that:

> There is a gathering cloud in the oil-producing communities and the situation is getting explosive. People are suffering in the midst of so much wealth being generated. People are getting more and more enlightened. There is so much hopelessness. The communities are bitter. There are many young people, including graduates who have been unemployed for years... (*The Guardian* 3-9-97:17).

The oil companies at the centre of violent conflicts have a surprisingly firm grasp of why their host communities have tried to draw attention to their problems through violent protest and agitation. According to Deji Haastrup, Manager responsible for Community Relations at Chevron Nigeria Limited:

> In many remote areas where poverty and unemployment are more pronounced and policing is almost absent, many of the youths have turned to crime and the criminal has not had much deterrent.

Shell, the largest multinational player in Nigeria's oil industry, has identified political, social, and environmental concern as the three core factors that precipitate community disturbances in Nigeria. The political factors include lack of reasonable share of oil revenue, which is complicated by the high population growth rate putting pressure on land, thus bringing about deforestation, over-farming and soil erosion. Another factor is the emergence of a new generation of well-educated youths aware of the disparity between urban and rural centres and believing that Multinational Oil Companies (MNOC) have the wherewithal to redress this social gap. The communities have also found that the best way of extracting a greater share of oil

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[4] Cited in *The Guardian* on Sunday, 11-10-98.

wealth is by holding MNOC to ransom. At the social level, Shell noted that 'Anger is growing and increasing militancy is overthrowing traditional social order in some communities'. This, according to Shell, has led to a situation whereby 'a complex and dynamic fragmentation of communities characterised by frequent power shifts between factions' makes it difficult, if not impossible, to negotiate compensation for land acquisition damages due to oil spillage. Another social factor is the resurgence of ethnic conflicts that can affect oil operations. The main environmental factor is oil spills, which Shell says are acts of sabotage. Between 1988 and 1994, according to Shell, some 28% of spills in Shell's area of operation were due to sabotage. This is increasing and sabotage accounted for 35% of all spills in 1994[5].

The reality in the Niger Delta today is that decades of oil production have accentuated the impoverishment of the inhabitants. The period also witnessed an acute neglect by oil companies, who argue that it is beyond their corporate callings to play the role of an alternative government and provide social amenities and infrastructure to their host communities. They provide such amenities to facilitate resource extraction rather than to benefit the oil communities. This in itself is enough to inflame communal feelings and the phenomenon is even worsened by regular display of opulence among oil workers and by oil managers' indifference to community relations. Some of the most contentious irritants are delays in paying compensation for expropriating communal resources, particularly land, and for oil spills, pollution and destruction of farmlands. Apart from the oil companies' exacerbation of communal conflicts in the Niger Delta, the State and Federal Governments have also been criticised for the underdevelopment of the oil communities. The local communities claim, with justification, that the government hardly does anything beyond facilitating crude oil production. The government is considered

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[5] See www.shell.org: 'Why Community Disturbances Happen'.

culpable for abandoning its principal social mandates of providing basic social infrastructure such as good roads, clean water, electricity and educational and health care facilities, as well as adequate security for life and property.

Youths and Violent Conflicts in the Niger Delta

The deadline set by Ijaw youths, whereby all multinational oil companies were to cease operations and vacate their land and territorial waters — and indeed the entire Niger Delta — expired on December 30, 1998. An estimated 5,000 ethnic Ijaw youths took this decision two weeks earlier, on December 11, at Kaiama[6], Bayelsa State. It was the climax of persistent calls on the oil companies to pay compensation for spoiling the environment and prevent the collapse of the local social infrastructure. The youths also raised political questions about the allocation of fiscal revenue in areas other than where it was derived, and about decentralisation and the devolution of power on local communities. Finally, they called for an overhaul of Nigeria's federal system, which disadvantaged the minority oil-bearing communities in the Niger Delta, and denounced the State-sponsored repression that had turned the oil communities into garrison enclaves[7].

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[6] Kaiama is the home-town of the renegade Major Isaac Adaka Boro who created the Niger Delta Volunteer Service (NDVS) with 50 men and declared an Ijaw nation on February 23, 1966. The decision to convene at Kaiama, where the historic declaration was made, should be seen as a conscious attempt to evoke the revolutionary spirit of Adaka Boro. The new NDVS is a group that must be watched closely. It is composed of highly mobile and violent Ijaw youths.

[7] For the full text of the Kaiama Declaration, see, ERAction, January-March, 1999, pp. 24-25.

When their deadline expired, the youths, nicknamed 'Egbesu Boys', marched to Government House in Yenegoa, Bayelsa State, singing traditional Ijaw war songs[8]. In a pre-emptive strike, armed soldiers on sentry duty at the Governor's lodge shot at and killed or wounded several protesters. According to the independent magazine, *Tell*, the youths first dispersed, reconvened in the evening and systematically raided military checkpoints and police stations, seizing weapons and ammunition. The conflict spread like wildfire. Youths from the neighbouring Odi village, close to Kaiama, ransacked the police station for arms and proceeded to Yenogoa to join the Egbesu Boys. At the Mbiama junction, the youths attacked and overpowered a joint army/mobile police checkpoint. An advance party of 25 fully armed soldiers, deployed to prevent the attack by the youths, were ambushed, disarmed and taken prisoner. At about 10 kilometres to Yenagoa, nearly 700 youths engaged another military detachment and incurred losses. While pursuing them, the soldiers met reinforcements of Egbesu boys, and both sides suffered severe casualties[9].

The youth wing of the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni Peoples (MOSOP), otherwise known as the National Youth Council of Ogoni Peoples (NYCOP), had already popularised such grassroots confrontation in the early 1990s. (Welch 1995a; 1995b; UNPO 1996; Obi 1997). Other ethnic communities in the Niger Delta adapted their strategy. Oil communities which were 'traditionally' less hostile towards the oil companies and the State became more belligerent. On 20 January 1998 for instance, Eket in Akwa Ibom State saw a major youth protest by a Pan-Eket group known as *Afigh Iwaad Ekid*,

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[8] Nnimmo Bassey, 'A Matter of Life and Death: Sustaining Civil Life and Environment', ERAction, January-March, 1999, p. 26-28.

[9] It is impossible to know the exact number of deaths at the hands of the soldiers. According to some allegations, dead bodies were thrown into River Nun during this incident. See ERAction, 1999, p. 19; Ima Niboro, 'Blood Bath in the Delta' (Cover Story), *Tell* Magazine, January 18, 1999, pp. 20-25).

or the Supreme Council of Eket Youths – the first of such protests during the thirty years of Mobil's presence in the town. This group demanded, among other concerns, that Mobil should allocate three days production every month to local community environmental development, that Mobil should relocate its headquarters from Lagos to Eket and appoint at least three Eket citizens as directors[10]. The Isoko National Youth Movement seized five flow stations in Isoko North and South LGA, sacked the oil workers and paralysed oil activities[11]. In mid-July 1999, 64 Shell staff, including seven expatriates, were held hostage in the Ozoro and Ovrode communities by militant youths from Isokoland. The youths, allegedly armed to the teeth, reportedly seized SPDC Drilling Rig-1A, blocked all access roads, and shut down all electricity generating sets. They also impounded some buses and outboard engines belonging to Daewoo Nigeria Limited, a contractor to Shell[12]. Itsekiri youths were not to be left out of this expression of collective anger and frustration. In late October 1998, irate youths in army uniform attacked Oruigbo village, an Itsekiri enclave in Warri South LGA, and held about 100 SPDC, Westminster Dredging and Texaco workers hostage for about four hours. On December 4, 1994, Nembe youths gathered at the town's waterfront to present their demands to the government and oil companies[13].

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[10] For other demands, see The Guardian on Sunday, 2-5-98, pp. 16-17).

[11] Their demands include: a N50 billion compensation to the Isoko people for more than three decades of oil exploitation; an additional two LG councils for the area; an Isoko representative on the Board of OMPADEC; and the immediate employment of all employable Isoko youths by Shell.

[12] Cf. *The Guardian*, June 30, 1999, back page.

[13] For a detailed statement on the Nembe position, see: 'An open Letter to the Head of State and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Nigeria' titled "The Agony of Nembe Creek Oil Field Community" in The Guardian, January 18, 1994, p. 27; see also The Punch (Lagos), 23-10-98, pp. 1 and 6.

Such incidents have become customary ways of expressing community grievances against oil and State interests in the Niger Delta [14]. There are several reasons why youths turned increasingly to violent confrontation to draw the attention of the public to their grievances and to those of their communities. The earliest community protests involved non-violent methods, such as petitions and the sending of community delegations to present complaints to oil companies and to the State and federal governments. There were also occasional demonstrations, boycotts and the picketing of government and oil company locations, but all this failed to bring any positive result. Indeed, expressing community grievances and even very legitimate social demands often produced little response from oil company executives or government officials, or occasionally evoked outright indignation and hostility. Having failed to win any concessions or developmental projects through peaceful means, militant youth groups then seized flow stations, rigs, and other oil installations, and held local and expatriate oil company staff hostage. They also damaged vehicles and other property belonging to oil companies. Easy access to sophisticated firearms and ammunition enabled militant youths to inflict severe damage on oil interests. At the same time, they were so familiar with the harsh Delta terrain that they could easily evade State security.

One cause of violence was the State's neglect of social amenities and infrastructure, such as piped water, good roads, health care facilities and schools. In addition, the oil communities had to endure the results of reckless oil exploration and production. This ushered in excruciating environmental conditions, which were often aggravated by oil spills, gas flaring, the discharge of waste into communal lands and waters, and other fallout of poor oilfield management by the multinational oil companies.

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[14] SPDC alone has 92 producing fields, 86 flow stations, 6,200 kilometres network of pipelines and flow stations. Cf. *Vanguard Newspapers* (Lagos), 3-4-98, p. 13.

Moreover, lack of opportunities for gainful employment demoralised the youth in the oil-producing communities of the Delta. Life for the mostly uneducated or semi-educated youths in a typical rural oil community is full of misery, because there is no chance for them to find employment and income-generating opportunities. The worst thing for many youths there is that they have no hope of breaking out of the prevailing cycle of poverty. These are the young men who form the militant wings of community movements. Their most viable survival strategy is to live off the oil companies, either by taking up menial, low-paid daily work, or by trying to hold oil companies to ransom for a fee. While this category of youths forms the militant wings, their better-educated counterparts, who have had the opportunity of higher education and access to the information superhighway, form the intellectual arm of ethno-community movements in the Delta. The activities of the two categories of youth are complementary.

Another factor contributing to youth violence, to which I made an allusion in the introduction, is that the revolt by youths in the Delta forms part of the ground swell of opposition to political domination by the Military. Every ethnic or sub-ethnic group in Nigeria has its grouse against the military. This explains why, during the last days of military rule, many groups were emboldened by the increasingly visible contradictions within the military to engage in armed revolt. The availability of sophisticated light weapons and ammunition accessible to youths in the Delta increases the risks of a further descent into anarchy and insecurity in the area. The hundreds of poorly mapped creeks and rivers across the Niger Delta are notorious routes for clandestine gunrunning.

Youths in different oil communities are increasingly forging alliances with their counterparts outside their immediate ethnic groups in the Delta. In this way, they learn new strategies for political activity under difficult conditions and improve their organisation.

The struggle by the Ogoni people, under the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP), may have been the most visible and sophisticated action of the early 1990s, but other Niger Delta communities were following their example. On August 16, 1997, for instance, a new Pan-Delta group called the Chikoko Movement was launched at Eleibiri in the Ekeremor Municipality of Bayelsa State[15]. Participants were drawn from different communities across the Niger Delta, as well as from human and environmental rights organisations and women's and youth movements. According to Isaac Osuoko, General Secretary of the Movement, the

> Chikoko is a resistance movement. It is a representative mass organisation of the minority oil-producing areas with the mandate to enforce the Niger Delta people's right to an environmental and ecological order conducive to their survival[16].

To quote him further,

> Chikoko, the idea, is something people have been thinking about and saying. The methods of the past have not yielded results. People in the Niger Delta are conscious and have always been protesting against oppression, exploitation and environmental degradation. There is a new realisation that we have to build a new movement and adopt measures and tactics to sustain the realities of the contradictions of the movement. The new resolve has gotten expression in Chikoko.

The establishment of the Chikoko Movement gives a clear signal that if nothing is done to address their myriad complaints, youths may be committed to a higher level of trans-ethnic political mobilisation. The Pan-Ijaw ethnic alliance, drawn from Ijaw territories across six oil-producing States, later adopted the Kaiama Declaration, along the

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[15] The organisers intentionally chose this location to generate negative publicity against Shell for refusing to clean up a spillage that occurred earlier in March 1997.

[16] Cited in The Guardian 3-9-97:17.

lines of the Ogoni Bill of Rights. The Kaiama Declaration set out four strategies to harmonise the disparate positions of the micro-Ijaw oil communities in their relations with oil companies and the Nigerian State. The first was *Operation Climate Change*, which entailed shutting down oil installations and extinguishing gas flares. The second was *Operation Lunch*, under which Ijaw youths were to embark on symbolic gestures, including clanging plates with spoons, to remind the government that they were hungry and had decided to take their destiny into their own hands. The third strategy was *Operation Reach Out*, which involved reconciliation between Ijaws and their warring neighbours, such as the Itsekiris and Ilajes, and a request to their neighbours to join in the shutting down of oil installations. The last action was, *Operation Warfare*, whereby an all-out counter-reprisal by the youths was envisaged in the event of military reprisals[17].

The mass mobilisation taking place around the Delta encouraged some scholars to conclude that:

> 'For people whose lives are mired in drudgery and desperation, the offer of an exciting, risky and possibly beneficial campaign of collective action may be a gain'. According to Tarrow, violence under this condition becomes the easiest of all options available for use by a disadvantaged group, because it does not have a 'high threshold of social transaction costs' in terms of preparation. It may also be easier for 'isolated, illiterate and local groups to imitate'. (Tarrow 1996: 19, 103). This culture of violence among contemporary youths points to a broader, all-pervasive crisis of youth. This crisis has several dimensions, most of which concern the social character of youths, which makes them prone to expressing violence. For instance, youths have a weak relationship with legitimate work, because of unemployment and a weak relationship with family and community life, as well as a freewheeling social life. (UNRISD 1995). To these, we can

[17] For details, cf. ERAction, 1998:24-25.

> add the collapse of traditional mechanisms for social mobility and for resolving social conflicts. Rebellion among youths has also been described as resulting from the political culture, which predisposes them to engage in low-intensity strife, in order to draw attention to their plight. In Richard's opinion, youth violence results from the alienation of young people 'from wider civil society by failures of educational systems and employment opportunities' (Richard 1997:159).

El-Kenz's (1996) analysis of youth violence in two urban settings, Dakar and Algiers, supports these arguments. According to him, a common factor is that youths who drifted into violence had suffered acute social alienation, defined as alienation from a society they are 'so familiar with but of which they are hardly a part' (p. 43). The youths respond by becoming 'uncontrollable, aggressive and violent' and in the final analysis, 'destabilising societies, frightening the middle classes and reinforcing, if not justifying, dictatorships' (p. 46). For youths, especially those entering adolescence, the times are marked by a 'descent into hell. The spirit of rebellion normal at this age is exacerbated by such deep frustration and transformed into hatred and violence. Their nihilism is aggravated by the rapid changes their society is undergoing'. According to him, it is in this context that:

> Almost everywhere, violence is the mode of response to the problems that inadequate political institutions and outdated codes of behaviour have proved incapable of solving. In all of these countries, it is the young people who are in the forefront: youths enraged by the injustice and indignity of a situation they refuse to accept fatalistically. They are using the only means left to them — violence (El-Kenz 1996: 51-52).

This paper does not pretend to exhaust all the causes and effects of youth violence in the Niger Delta. But by considering some of their main aspects, we seek to question the popular but erroneous impression given in literature that youth revolts are ill-informed, irrelevant, unstructured and largely episodic expressions of blind

violence (Momoh 1996:158). If these patterns of youth political activism are anything to go by, it may not be appropriate to characterise their emergence in most oil communities as reflecting 'peasant environmentalism', that is less an advocacy of abstract 'nature', than a struggle by peasants in those communities to protect their means of subsistence from destruction by oil companies. (Hutchful 1998:157). The communities are protesting against more than ecological recklessness. They are angered by the obvious lack of basic social infrastructure, the lop-sided pattern of revenue allocation, as well as by their political and economic marginalisation from the mainstream of the Nigerian political system. They are disturbed by State policies, State-sponsored repression and by the high-handedness of both oil companies and State officials in responding to these perceived conditions[18] (Omoweh 1995, Obi 1997).

Important as these different perspectives are in understanding the role of youths in violent conflicts in the Delta, they offer only a partial explanation. In my opinion, *powerlessness* presents a more useful theoretical insight into the basis for violent social conflict in the region. Aina (1996:61) has defined *powerlessness* in this context as the process and condition of deprivation and exclusion from the benefits and rewards of society. Youth violence in the Niger Delta is not just a reaction to neglect by the State and oil companies, but also a reaction against the forces that have given less endowed communities an undue advantage over them. The forces at the centre of youth *powerlessness* in the Delta are therefore multi-dimensional, being based on factors that are both endogenous and exogenous to the oil-producing region (Oyerinde 1998:55-76). In a situation of *powerlessness*, violence becomes a bargaining weapon for negotiating, legitimising or violating public order. Of course, such a predisposition to youth violence in oil-producing communities raises fundamental questions

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[18] See The Ogoni Bill of Rights, 1993; the Kaiama Declaration, *op. cit.*

in the dialectics of violence, security, law and order. The State and the Opposition alike have tested their responses to it in time. In what ways does violent mobilisation legitimise repression? How has the State responded to political mobilisation and the growing insecurity among oil communities in the Niger Delta? In what significant ways have State responses reduced or exacerbated the crisis of law, order and security in the Niger Delta and in Nigeria in general? We will focus on these questions in the next section.

The State and Maintenance of Public Order and Security in the Niger Delta

It is hard to believe that the scale and intensity of the violent civil conflict that engulfed the Niger Delta could pass unnoticed in government circles. The truth is that crude oil is so crucial to the national economy and the fiscal survival of the Nigerian State that government has always maintained a keen interest in events in the Niger Delta. The resurgence of social upheavals in the oil region has been a major source of concern and irritation to successive governments, military or civilian, in Abuja. They are neither happy about the causes and dynamics of the civil conflicts that have enveloped the oil region, nor unaware of the threat they pose to national peace and security. Indeed, an excerpt from the report of a ministerial Fact-finding Team on the problems of the Niger Delta, which was set up by General Sani Abacha's regime, summarised government's perception of the gravity of the security challenges posed by the crisis in the oil region. According to the report,

> A new and increasingly dangerous awareness and sensitivity is sweeping through the oil-producing communities across the country. It is in the interest of the oil industry and the nation that urgent and lasting solutions should be put in place to prevent the situation from getting worse[19].

[19] Cited in ERAction, January-March, 1999, p. 8.

Similarly, in his budget statement for 1998, General Abdulsalam Abubakar lamented that his regime 'cannot allow the continued reckless expression of these (angry) feelings. Seizure of oil wells, rigs and platforms, as well as hostage taking, vehicle hijacking, all in the name of expressing grievances, are totally unacceptable to this administration'. He then spoke of 'dissent through dialogue rather than dissent through violence'[20]. In the last days of his regime, General Abubakar initiated moves that implied a genuine concern about the plight of the oil communities. At a meeting with the military administrators of oil-producing States in Port Harcourt in late October 1998, he acknowledged that 'As it is today, the agitation is not something that had come just overnight. It has been accumulating and the political trauma that we had for the past four years also exacerbated the issue...'[21].

Despite the government's awareness of the problems, the national authorities seemed to have little interest in finding less contentious solutions to the conflicts than military ones, which could only aggravate the disturbances in the oil communities. This has prompted criticism of the State as being itself an instigator of violent conflict in the oil region. As Watton (1984: 11) persuasively argued, 'perhaps the largest single factor in the promotion of revolutions and collective violence has been the great concentration of power in nation-states, *and the propensity to deploy them as and when due*' [22]. The implication of State-sponsored repression is that the State does not simply respond to violence; it is often the primary instigator of violence. The State is prepared to have recourse to repressive violence, not because it has much chance of succeeding, but because its own inherent weaknesses prevent recourse to less violent

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[20] *Ibid.*, p. 21.

[21] Cited in *The Guardian*, 29-10-98.

[22] See also Gurr, 1986; Gatner and Regan, 1996.

alternatives[23]. To put it another way, the State turns to a repressive mode, because the 'authoritarian flow of rule results not from high level of power and legitimacy, but from the tenuousness of authority and the search for it' (Callaghy 1989, 97).

The Nigerian State has consistently reacted to the violent crisis in the oil-rich Niger Delta by using force. Under successive military regimes, urgent attention was given to developing elaborate security architecture that could effectively crush militant opposition groups while ensuring the survival of the regime at the same time. Each military regime deployed armed soldiers, as well as the notorious mobile police paramilitary branch, popularly called 'Kill-and-go', to quell community disturbances. With the active support of the Federal Government, State Governments set up special military squads of officers and men loyal to the government. This was the strategy employed by General Abacha's infamous regime when it sponsored the creation of the Rivers State Internal Security Task Force (RSISTF) to pacify Ogoniland. *Human Rights Watch/Africa* reported that a detachment of Nigerian soldiers engaged in peace-keeping operations, under the ECOWAS Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) in Liberia was ostensibly withdrawn to repel incursions by Cameroonian *gendarmes*, although in actual fact they were deployed to quell the Ogoni uprising. The RSISTF soon became a highly repressive army of occupation. The first interview with soldiers engaged in that punitive expedition was most revealing. According to their account, they were flown in under cover of darkness and only knew they had trained their guns on Nigerian citizens after the inhabitants began shouting and running into the bush. On one occasion, a female

[23] Mason and Krane, 1989: 177; See also, Aflatooni and Allen, 1991.

victim of a soldier's brutality narrated her gruesome ordeal, after the soldiers had locked up her 10 year-old son in a room:

> The soldiers beat me with the butts of their guns, pushed me unto the ground and kicked me. They tore off my wrapper, then my underwear. Two of them raped me through the anus, three through the usual way. While the soldiers raped me, another would beat me. I tried to scream, but they held my mouth. They said if I made too much noise, they would kill me. By the time they left, I was in so much pain I couldn't move. (*Human Rights Watch/Africa* Release, March 27, 1995)

The insistence on using force to maintain security in the Niger Delta, rather than employing innovative non-military options, turned the region into perhaps the most heavily militarised part of Nigeria. At one time, Yenogoa, the capital of the newly-created Bayelsa State, predominantly populated by the Ijaw ethnic group, boasted some 10 armoured vehicles and over 500 soldiers, along with fast-attack aircraft and two warships, in addition to the Navy and Army amphibious battalions in the nearby waters. There were also several special task force units of armed forces, paramilitary police and regular policemen under various code names: 'Operation Salvage' in Bayelsa State and 'Operation Flush' in Rivers State[24].

An unwritten but widely accepted rule for such special units responsible for maintaining peace and security in the oil region is that the rank-and-file soldiers involved are mostly from outside the immediate zone. In the Ogoni campaign, for example, all the local policemen were deployed outside the community, before the commencement of military action, for which new and less emotional police were employed. This is the general pattern of troop deployment by any regime pursuing an agenda of the kind implemented by the Nigerian State in the Niger Delta. The rationale for this, according to

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[24] See *Human Rights Watch/Africa* Release, 1999:121-122.

Huntington (1991:191), is that 'Soldiers and police were less likely to obey orders to use violence if they could identify with the people they were ordered to shoot. Authoritarian regimes, consequently, ensured that there were social, ethnic, or racial differences between the users and targets of regime violence'. (Huntington 1991:199). Horowitz's extensive study of the role of the military in ethnic conflicts confirms the same point. In his view, one of the criteria for recruiting of personnel for internal security duties, is 'distance of home region from the area of likely civil disorder' - so that 'local sympathies would not interfere with the performance of duty in the event of unrest'. (1985:447). Besides the pattern of recruitment, the actual management of communal disturbances by soldiers is at issue. When communal strife simmers, it is far-fetched to suppose that the day-to-day conduct of soldiers will help to maintain peace and security. This is even more the case when the government is slow to meet the most vital logistic needs of the soldiers, thus obliging them to use predatory means to survive. (Welsh 1996:74ff)

The operational behaviour of soldiers and armed police derives from how they are recruited and trained - something well documented in the extant literature. Here, we only wish to recall that the colonial police forces were traditional instruments for subjugating restive local peoples. After the British presence was established by gunboats, it became necessary to manage the day-to-day matters of administration and enforcement of law and order. Constabularies of different shapes were set up and these included the Glover irregulars, the Royal Niger Constabulary, the Oil Rivers irregulars, mostly recruited from bandits, thugs, social miscreants, rogues and troublesome 'area boys'. Such forces were patently anti-people and anti-society. The colonial State expanded largely through interventions by the Army and the Police. At independence, the post-colonial State did not redefine the historical role of the Army or the Police. The Army inherited the role of enforcer of the will of the predatory State, not that of the people. The Army was to maintain order as defined by the State. Not

surprisingly, the Army terrorised the people, just as it did during the ruthless pacification of the Tiv community in the 1960s[25].

I do not want to give an erroneous impression in this paper that the narrow perception of security in military terms under military regimes made the Nigerian State solely responsible for the mismanagement of the crises in the oil-producing region. The paper rather argues that at each stage, the State squandered every opportunity to take the lead in addressing the myriad problems facing the oil communities. However, the State did not act alone. It was forced by the circumstances of its own existence to maintain an unholy alliance with multinational oil companies, under the guise of joint venture collaborations. The bond between the State and the foreign oil companies is very strong. One can insist that on matters pertaining to oil production, the lines between the State and the oil companies are blurred or non-existent. At different times in the past, the State had to solicit assistance from oil companies; on other occasions, oil companies requested and received assistance from the State, particularly to keep the oil-producing communities in check. Controversy often followed such interactions between the State and oil companies.

The first occasion of large-scale community strife in the Niger Delta occurred at Umuechem village in Rivers State on January 11, 1990, exactly within the framework of the alliance between the State and Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC). The Divisional Manager of SPDC in the eastern operational division had initiated an invitation to the notorious Mobile Police Unit, to help quell civil disturbances that were affecting oil production. During that incident, almost the whole village was burnt down in an operation that also involved gruesome killings and rape and the looting of property. In defence of this move, Shell later argued that the Mobile Police Unit

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[25] Personal Interviews, July 30, 1999.

was invited because 'Past experiences called for the presence of Mobile Police as a deterrent and the best chance of a peaceful resolution of the situation'. Shell also acknowledged that the police did not heed its advice to deploy MOPOL immediately. Rather, it deployed regular policemen, who were chased and beaten by a mob. It was then 'purely a police decision to deploy mobile police... Shell played no part in the decisions made by police as the incident unfolded...The response from police personnel is properly a matter for the police'. No wonder that law enforcement agents, who constituted themselves as an army. of occupation in militant oil communities, in turn became targets of reprisals by militant youths. In Ikpako, a village in Ovia Northeast LGA of Edo State, restive youths shot and wounded four policemen. According to the police spokesman, DSP Yomi Oladimeji, the police were not aware that the youths were armed, and by the time they knew, the youths had opened fire[26]. In the same month, the decomposing bodies of five policemen were recovered in Ugbo town, the ancestral home of the Ilaje-ugbos in Ilaje LGA of Ondo State, three weeks after they had allegedly been killed[27].

What policy options are available to President Olusegun Obasanjo in the management of youth violence and civil conflict in general in the Niger Delta? What are the prospects for the maintenance of public law and order and management of violence in the oil-rich Niger Delta in the new millennium? I have proposed answers to these important questions in the concluding section.

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[26] See *The Guardian*, 29-10-98.

[27] *The Punch*, 30-10-98, back page.

Conclusions and Recommendations

One of the most daunting challenges facing the present Obasanjo Administration is how to manage the pockets of ethnic, religious, environmental and resource-induced conflicts that are erupting in various parts of the country[28]. In the oil basin, there are three policy decisions that the government must take. All of them will form benchmark criteria for measuring the success and achievements of the new government at the expiration of its four-year tenure in 2003. The government must address and remedy the socio-economic and environmental conditions that breed underdevelopment in the Niger Delta. This clearly entails a major policy shift away from Abuja's perception of the Niger Delta as a colonial enclave, whose only true usefulness lies in its producing the proverbial golden eggs — crude oil and gas. To achieve this, the Government must quickly purge itself of the garrison mentality that oil must be extracted at all costs, even if this requires endless repression and coercion. According to the late Professor Claude Ake, such an attitude has nurtured a 'bizarre and frightening accumulation of terror', as security was restricted to the use of punitive force rather than human development. (Cited in *Tell*, 29-1-96:34). Such a shift is in progress, though at a rather slow pace, as attested by the President's frequent visits to the troubled oil region, as well as the important policy statements emanating from Abuja. As if to underline his government's prior attention to the plight of the oil communities, President Olusegun Obasanjo's first official visit outside the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja, was to Warri Township, where he assessed

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[28] It is interesting to note the historical point made by the Benin-based Environmental Rights Action (ERA) to the effect that Obasanjo himself 'prepared the shroud in which the dying Niger Delta is now about to be buried'. This is an apparent reference to the several disempowering military decrees, especially the Land Use Decree of 1978, which placed all lands in the hands of the Federal Government. See ERAction, January-March, 1999, p. 11.

the extent of damage done to the town during the hostilities between two ethnic groups, Itsekiri and Urhobo, which occurred at the same time as his swearing in on May 29, 1999[29]. On September 26 of the same year, the President also visited the troubled Bonny Island, where the protests of militant youths and indeed the entire community against the empty promises by Government and oil companies had shut down the $3.8 billion Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) plant[30]. In both instances, the President urged peace and dialogue, instead of reading the riot act from Abuja, as had been done in the past. The Government also made good its promise to present the National Assembly with a detailed blueprint for the integrated development of the Niger Delta. Although the Bill, entitled 'Niger Delta Development Commission Bill', has passed into law, it continues to generate heated public criticism. Yet, it is certain that if implemented with sincerity, the blueprint could drastically alleviate poverty and underdevelopment in the Niger Delta. If the Government succeeds in implementing the law, it might also soothe the frail nerves of those clamouring for a radical restructuring of Nigeria's federalism, fiscal structure and revenue allocation formula.

The second policy initiative must be directed towards creating a stress-free environment for the oil companies to carry on with their exploration and production activities, but certainly not in a way that is detrimental to the interests and well-being of the host oil communities. These communities are often at loggerheads with the

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[29] In his inaugural speech, the President specifically promised that his Government would immediately present a comprehensive bill on the Niger Delta to the National Assembly.

[30] The list of demands included: the immediate employment of 50 Bonny graduates and 300 unskilled indigenes, appointment of Bonny people to top management and administrative positions, provision of electricity from the LNG grid, repatriation of an expatriate who allegedly shot at protesting youths and payment of amounts ranging from N100 million to N500 million monthly as penalty for gas flaring (See *The Guardian* 27-9-99:1-2).

oil companies over a myriad of social, economic and environmental issues. The popular perception is that the oil companies ignore such complaints and disregard their extensive consultations with the host communities, when they embark on community projects. Of course, this would be much easier to remedy if the oil companies could take a cue from the positive overtures that the Government has made to the oil communities. While oil companies can, and indeed should, benefit from the fledging democratic atmosphere, it may take some time before they can enjoy a much-desired cordial relationship with the host communities. To achieve this, the oil companies must aim to achieve the 'good oilfield practices' and standards similar to those prevailing in Europe and North America. They must see themselves as the host communities' partners-in-progress, not in the rhetorical and deceitful way that characterised the past, but with genuine interest and concern. So long as the oil companies' community relations officers see themselves as imperial colonisers, who cannot be doubted, minimal progress can be made towards peaceful coexistence with the host communities. The Government's cordial relationship with the oil companies bred a situation in which the companies could do almost anything and get an official nod. A demonstration of seriousness and sincerity of purpose in dealing with the oil communities in general, and with their youth in particular, would be an excellent sign.

The third policy would be to end, or at least reduce violent inter-communal conflicts among the many micro-communities in the Niger Delta. The conflict among the Itsekiri, Urhobo and Ijaw ethnic groups over Warri Township has become a reference point in the Delta. But there are other conflicts, such as that between the Kalabari and Okrika ethnic groups, and the migration-based ethnic conflict between the itinerant Ijaws and other ethnic groups in Ondo, Bayelsa, Delta, Rivers, and Akwa Ibom States. I have elsewhere made detailed and critical analyses of these conflicts and how to manage

them so they need not detain us now[31]. The three important steps to be taken can be briefly recalled. First, is the need to de-militarise the Niger Delta by withdrawing soldiers and replacing them with well-trained and well-equipped regular policemen. The fact that soldiers have been so active in the Niger Delta can be attributed to prolonged military rule. Under the military, especially those whose survival was thought to be under constant assault by perceived or real 'enemies', the use of brute military force became the norm rather than the exception. Now that military rule is over, it is important for the incumbent government to resist the temptation of reckless use of armed forces to quell civil disturbances. As noted earlier in this paper, it is well known that the presence of heavily-armed military forces in the Niger Delta often exacerbated civil conflict. At the same time, it is important that the Government should provide the police with suitable communication facilities, operational hardware and vehicles for effective patrol of the Delta. At present, the reach of the police is limited to a handful of poorly maintained outposts. While the police force has played a socially demeaning role in civil conflicts in the Delta, if they had the right morale, conditions of service and access to up-to-date equipment and facilities, they would still be in a better position to foster peace in the Niger Delta. In one communal clash between the Liama and Beletima communities in Bayelsa State, a police witness expressed exasperation that although the two communities on the other side of the Brass River were less than five minutes away by boat, 'we saw what happened during the attack. We saw people running in different directions as huts and houses went up in flames, but we had not a single speed boat with which we could cross to the other side of the river'[32].

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[31] See, Charles Ukeje, 'Ethnic Conflicts and Democratic Consolidation in Nigeria' (forthcoming, 2001).

[32] *The Guardian* of Sunday, August 2, 1997, p. 7.

The second requirement is to wean militant Niger Delta youths away from the psychology of violence to which they have become accustomed over the years. It is true that the culture of violence among youths is one of the aftermaths of prolonged military rule, which prevented the expression of collective opinion without the use of force. Now that military rule is terminated, the demands of the youths, especially the creation of educational and employment opportunities and an enabling social environment for human security, must be urgently addressed. In this regard, the social structures that continue to fuel youth violence and community disturbances in the Delta should be dismantled. The most pressing requirement to that effect is how to control the spread of dangerous light weapons and ammunition. The hundreds of poorly mapped creeks and rivers across the vast Niger Delta wetlands have gained notoriety for clandestine gunrunning. This access to weapons continues to encourage youths to stick to violence and to stand up to superior firepower from security forces. Urgent actions are needed to demobilise and demilitarise militant youths. Perhaps one of the most effective ways to do this would be to offer them attractive options, such as education and vocational training, scholarships and job opportunities. The government could work out scholarship-for-gun and job-for-gun schemes in collaboration with the oil companies. Both schemes would allow youths to turn in their weapons without prosecution or other forms of retribution. The huge sums of money being spent now by the State and oil companies on elaborate security personnel and structures could be diverted to this more rewarding programme. It should be accompanied by policies to give fresh opportunities to youths. Many of them have had to cope with a daily lifestyle of drudgery and waste, compounded by the inability to pursue traditional vocational activities such as farming and fishing. The youths' readiness to turn to the familiar crimes of the weak, such as blackmail, kidnapping, harassment, extortion and sabotage of oil installations, can be reversed if they are offered more than the

current short-term palliatives. According to an old African adage, when a bird perches on a rope, neither of them can maintain stability. Youths in oil communities are aggrieved that they have so little to show in terms of improved quality of life and social amenities after decades of oil exploration and production in the Niger Delta. The Government could achieve the domestic peace and stability lacking in the country by listening to and meeting their modest demands.

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