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The Niger Delta Environmental Crisis in Nigeria: A Perspective Analysis (Pp. 150-164)

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Abstract

This study gives a perspective analysis of the Niger Delta Environmental Crisis in Nigeria. Right from the time the first oil well was struck in 1956 in Oloibiri, an Ijaw town in the present day Bayelsa State, till now, oil has become the mainstay of the Nigerian economy accounting for about 98% of her annual earnings; while numerous multinational oil companies have been attracted to the region to exploit oil with reckless abandon regardless of its impacts on the inhabitants of the region. The constant environmental disarticulation occasioned by oil exploration has resulted in widespread indignation and youth restiveness in the region. Behavioural proclivities associated with oil exploration include sealing of production sites, vandalising oil installations including pipelines and hostage taking and demand for ransom. This erratic behaviour has negative impact on the production of oil and constitutes a serious liquidity problem to all levels of government as it interrupts the steady flow of capital to the national treasury and constitutes a security threat to governance at all levels. The paper is rounded off with recommendations tailored towards combating the imbroglio and the conclusion.

Key Words: Environmental, Crisis, Oil Spillage, Gas Flaring, Amnesty.

Introduction

The Niger Delta region comprises of Akwa-Ibom, Bayelsa, Rivers, Cross River, Delta, Edo and some portions of Ondo, Imo and Abia States of Nigeria. Most of these states are located within the coastal area of Nigeria and by implication some of the inhabitants rely on fishery and other aquatic business as their major source of livelihood. Prominent among the over forty ethnic nationalities represented in the region are Ijaw, Ogoni, Urhobo, Isoko, Adoni, Efik and Kalabari among others (Rafiu, 2008).

Right from 1956, when the first oil well was discovered in Oloibiri, an Ijaw town in the present day Bayelsa State, till now, oil has become the mainstay of the Nigerian economy accounting for about 98% of her annual earnings. It needs be stressed that the lands and waters of the Niger Delta region produce the bulk of oil that generates this stupendous wealth for the country (Ogege, 2006).

However, the region had been infested with a lot of crises or problems which demanded urgent solutions and which have threatened not only the security or safety of lives and properties of the peoples living within the region but also constitute social and security problems for the entire nation as the federal government finds it difficult to manage the crisis. The constant environmental disarticulation occasioned by oil and gas exploration and production and the seeming indifference of the government and the oil companies to the plights of the indigenes of the oil enclave constitute the bone of contention or the main source of the conflict.

This paper discusses the Niger Delta environmental crisis: the causes, the nature and pattern of reactions to the problem by both the Niger Delta indigenes and the government, the effects, as well as the challenges the crisis pose to security. The paper is rounded off with recommendations geared towards finding a lasting solution to the crisis and the conclusion.

Causes of the Niger Delta crisis

The factors that are responsible for the Niger Delta crises are varied and many; prominent among the factors are the following:

1. The deprivation of the people of the region

There is no gainsaying the fact that the Nigerian nation has the umbilical cord of its economy invariably tied to the region's natural resource, namely petroleum oil – which has been producing the bulk of the funds with which the country is being run for years. However, there is not much to show in the

region in terms of development, despite the enormous contribution of the region to the national treasury. Deprivation of land is the first of such deprivations. Oil Industry activities are largely predicated on their unrestrained access to land because they derive their oil from the earth crust. The oil bearing enclaves on the other hand depend on land to grow their food, fish and hunt. Land is central to the social system of the people of the Niger Delta as well as other parts of Nigeria. In this respect, the acquisition of land by the oil firms for pipelines rights of ways, flow lines, flow stations and gas flaring sites normally engender acrimony or clashes between the oil firms and host communities. In most cases, these disputes are fuelled by the quantum of compensation paid to land owners as well as payment of compensations to the wrong families (Aghalino, 2001).

Also, the incessant oil spillage in the region rendered unsafe for human consumption the natural water in the area which ordinarily should have been a blessing to the people.

2. The burden of devastated ecology

As it were, the exploration for, and the production of, oil and gas have impacted negatively on the environment of the oil-bearing enclave in Nigeria. Wide scientific consensus suggests that there is acute environmental degradation and crises in the oil bearing enclave of the Niger Delta (Frynas, 1998; Ashton, 1998; Aghalino, 2008). Aghalino (2008) noted that Nigeria has the dubious reputation of having the highest gas-flaring rate in the world, while gas flaring (which is a means of “safely” disposing of waste gases through the use of combustion) has led to severe environmental and ecological problems for the oil bearing communities in Nigeria.

Table 1: Gas Produced and Flared, 1958-1994

YEAR	GAS PRODUCTION	GASE GLARED Mm ³
1958	46	-
1959	140	-
1960	144	-
1961	310	-
1962	487	-
1963	626	-
1964	1,029	-
1965	2,250	-
1966	2,907	-
1967	2,634	-
1968	1,462	-
1969	4,126	-

1970	8,039	-
1971	12,975	7,957
1972	17,122	12,790
1973	21,882	21,487
1974	2,710	26,776
1975	1,856	18,333
1976	21,276	20,617
1977	21,924	20,952
1978	21,306	19,440
1979	27,618	26,073
1980	24,885	22,904
1981	17,202	14,162
1982	14,830	11,940
1983	15,207	11,948
1984	16,251	12,817
1985	18,426	14,846
1986	17,900	13,917
1987	15,580	12,291
1988	20,212	14,737
1989	26,300	18,730
1990	28,163	21,820
1991	31,587	25,934
1992	32,465	24,588
1993	33,445	25,406
1994	33,928	25,934

Source: Niger Delta Environmental Survey (NDES), Volume 1, Socio-Economic Characteristics, (Lagos: NDES, 1999)

Table 1 attests to the volume of the gas flared since the beginning of commercial oil production in Nigeria. The table shows that the production of natural gas has grown rapidly over the years. For instance, in 1958 only 46 million cubic meters (Mm³) were produced, but this increased to 8,039 in 1970 and 24,885 in 1980. The figure rose to 33,928 in 1994. Unfortunately, only an insignificant proportion of the quantity of the natural gas produced is utilized, while most of it is flared. For instance as much as 99 percent of gas produced was flared in 1970; while more than 70 percent was flared for almost all the following years up to 1994. In short, about 479,392 mm³ of gas was flared between 1958 and 1994.

It has been estimated that about five hundred million naira (₦500,000,000) was lost to gas flaring daily in Nigeria (The Guardian, August 17, 1988). A corollary to this is the colossal destruction of the environment through the charring of vegetation in gas flare sites as buttressed by Ikelege (2006) on the flaring sites around the Isoko area. Not to be overlooked also is the

destruction of the mangrove and rainforest vegetation with its attendant loss of numerous trees and plants with their potential economic and pharmaceutical values (Aghalino, 2002). Thus, gas flaring has led to severe environmental and ecological problems for the oil-bearing communities in particular and Nigeria in general.

Also, the various oil prospecting companies in the course of drilling for crude oil spilled a conservative 2.4 million barrels into the coastal and offshore marine environment with a negative result of making the natural water in the region dangerous for human consumption (Tell, 1995).

3. Lack of basic socio-economic infrastructures

Another contributory factor that engendered conflict in the region is the lack of modern infrastructures that do engender social and economic growth. Motorable roads, pipe borne water, health facilities and electricity are rare commodities to come by in the region (The Nation, 19/10/2000). There has been criminal and inexplicable neglect of the region by successive governments of the Nigerian state that has brought about negligible development and unimaginable level of poverty in all ramifications.

4. The demand for resource control

The youth unrest in the area seems to be predicated on their belief that they should receive great (er) benefits from oil operations bearing in mind the fact that the region produced the bulk of money that sustained the nation. The Kaima Declaration, adopted by well over 5,000 Ijaw youth best articulated the demands of the Ijaw and the various Niger Delta people (Aghalino, 2001). One of the high points of the declaration was the emphasis on resource control and the restructuring of the moribund Nigerian state. Despite the massive oil production and revenues accruing to the nation, the economy of the region progressively declined. The region has only received little sources as derivation flow from the federation account. It declined from 50% in 1966 to 45% in 1970, 1% in 1979, 2% in 1982, 1.5% in 1984, 3% in 1992 and 13% since 1999 (Ikelegbe, 2006).

5. Perceived collusion of the government with oil companies

According to Akinola (2008:13), “without mincing words, the indigenes saw the government and oil companies as being in concert to destroy them”. Thus the sorry state of the people as above highlighted pitched the indigenes of the region against the government on one hand and the oil companies on the other hand for their seemingly ‘I don’t care attitude’ to their plight that is, deprivations and neglect of their areas in terms of development.

The government in all its actions was always ready to defend the position of the oil companies in virtually all their conflicts with the people of the oil bearing enclave while the government at the slightest signal of trouble always dispatched with urgency security forces to defend and protect oil installations and personnel of the oil companies in such troubled spots (Akinola, 2008).

There was also deliberate effort of the Federal Government to be silent on laws that regulated the activities of the oil companies especially those that concerned the protection of the environment; while the government only played occasional lip service to such laws due to the agitation of the people. Though the setting up of Federal Environmental Protection Agency (FEPA) appeared to be a welcome reaction to the situation, the body was preoccupied with gathering of information and statistics with the government rather than translating them into discernible positive action (Akinola, 2008). There have been reported cases of laxity, sluggishness and passiveness in the Directorate of Petroleum Resources (DPR) monitoring, oversight and enforcement functions over the activities of the multinational oil companies operating in the Niger Delta region (Oyovwi and Oriavwote, 2012). The DPR has not effectively occupied its roles and effectively engage the oil industry operators in terms of effecting compliance with rules, standards, regulations and prescriptions. Oil industry practice in the management of waste and environmental pollution is extremely poor and far below international standards.

6. Government's lack of commitment towards the welfare of the people

The Federal Government failed to embark on genuine efforts geared towards objectively tackling the issues that made the people of the region to resort to armed struggle to fight their cause. It seemed the government is more interested in the continuous undisturbed flow of royalties paid by the companies, than the overall welfare of the people who suffered the brunt of oil exploration.

Tell (1998) reported of a Texaco major spillage in Funwa flow station five, in Rivers State and government's non-challant attitude to the welfare of the people of the affected region. It reported that the government collected 12 million Naira paid by Texaco on behalf of the affected communities; took 4 million naira as capital project and reserved only 3 million naira for the over 300 towns, villages, hamlets, fishing communities and individuals that were

negatively affected. The latter did not even receive the three million naira until after ten years later when the fund was released by the government.

The high expectation of improved standards of living the people of the area had hoped for over five decades had been dashed, hence their resolve to take their fate in their hands through all conceivable means including armed struggle.

Nature and pattern of the indigenes' reaction to the crisis

The nature and pattern of the reactions of the people of the Niger Delta to the above scenario manifested in three basic forms - These are vandalism of oil installations, sealing of production sites, Hostage taking and demand for ransom (Nigerian Tribune, 2007). These points are discussed below:

a. Vandalisation of oil installations

The resistance of the Niger Delta has frequently been expressed through their resort to vandalism of petroleum products, pipelines and other installations in the region.

b. Sealing of production sites

The agitation of the aggrieved people of the Niger Delta region also manifested in their blockades of oil prospecting and exploration activities of the oil companies operating in the area. The year 1993 marked a watershed in the agitations by the people for adequate compensation from the government and the oil companies for the oil being taken from their land (Aghalino, 2002). The Ogoni people under the auspices of the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP) and led by the late Ken Saro Wiwa caused series of troubles that led to the closure of Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC) operations in Ogoni land (Osaghe, 1995; Nannan, 1995). Since that period, the region had witnessed several sealing of production sites of the oil companies.

c. Hostage taking and demand for ransom

This manifested in form of kidnapping of oil companies' personnel mostly expatriates by the irate youths in the region and demand for ransom before they are released. This situation posed a veritable threat to governance in the region and proved an intractable problem for government at all levels to tackle. The Nation of (October 12, 2009) reported that over N90 billion has been paid as ransom to Kidnappers between 2006 and 2009. It noted that kidnapping and ransom (KR) began in 2006 with the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) using it as a political weapon to

demand for resource control; while people take to kidnapping and ransom because of the low risk and high reward involved.

Government's response to the Niger Delta crisis

The Federal Government has responded to the Niger Delta crisis in the following ways:

a. Enactment of developmental programmes

The developmental programmes government had mounted in the region included the Niger Delta Basins Development Authority (NDBDA), the Oil Mineral Producing Areas Development Commission (OMPADEC) and the most recent, Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC). It is obvious that the nation has never been found lacking in policy initiatives. What is disturbing, however, is that policies are never pursued to their logical conclusion. The increasing cases of youth unrest and kidnapping and demand for ransom in the region suggest that the impact of the above bodies inaugurated is yet to be significantly felt. The Federal Government was also alleged to be owing the NDDC 326 billion naira as at April, 2008 (Nigerian Tribune, 2008).

b. Declaration of military action against the militants

Government's response to the crisis also manifested in the declaration of war against the militants. This line of action was embarked upon in the face of the killing and kidnapping of some officers of the Joint Task Force (JTF) which the federal government sent to the region, by the militants. The disappearance of some soldiers and the search for them sparked off the May 15, 2009 military operations in Gbaramatu Kingdom. The "Cordon and Search" by the Joint Task Force snow balled into full military operation across the Niger Delta before the Federal Government through the Defence Headquarters, halted the exercise in June, 2009 (The Nation, 13/10/2009). Arrest and incarceration of notable militant leaders are also part of the government's response.

It should be noted that before 2009, the Federal Government has embarked on the use of force to crush the resistance of the Niger Delta people. This could be buttressed by the execution of the environmental campaigners (Ogoni nine) in 1995 and the bombardment of Odi village in 2001 by the Federal Government (Rafiu, 2008). Since that development, the region had not experienced any lasting peace. The option of diplomacy is usually

preferable to the use of force in effective resolution of conflicts especially as regards the Niger Delta crisis.

c. Amnesty programme

This is the latest of government's response to the crisis. The Amnesty Presidential programme is geared towards giving pardon and forgiveness to militants who laid up their arms to embrace dialogue; while the process will be followed up by rehabilitation exercise on the part of the Federal Government. Under the Amnesty agenda, militants were given up till October 4, 2009 to surrender their arms (The Punch, 01/10/2009). At present, majority of the militants have surrendered their arms to the Federal Government and embraced the peace initiatives of the government.

The Punch (October, 2009), reported on the positive effects of the implementation of the Amnesty programme being witnessed in the country. It recorded that daily crude oil production level had been jerked up as it has risen to over 1.7 million barrels per day, the highest in six months; while Nigeria had also exceeded the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries' crude production quota for the first time in over seven months. All these had been linked to the recent implementation of the amnesty programme which had also jerked up gas production to about 600 million cubic feet in the country. Meanwhile, the Government had also approved N200 billion for Niger Delta projects under its post amnesty programme (The Nation, 29/10/2009). Despite the allocation of this sum, like in the past, the supervision and judicious implementation of such projects should be accorded greater attention by the government; as the remarkable possible impact of such projects on the lives of the people in the region is yet to be seen.

Effects of the crisis

The Niger Delta environmental crisis had unleashed a lot of negative effects especially on the indigenes of the area as could be gleaned below:

a. Alienation of the indigenes and loss of sense of nationhood

One of the unpalatable implications of the crisis on the people of the area is that they felt alienated and had loss of sense of nationhood. The government had not been seen as playing the non-partisan role but a partisan one in the area. This much is agreed to by Akinola (2008:14) and substantiated along the following strands of argument:

government collusion with the oil company in denying the people of the Niger Delta the desired good living; the unimpressive attitude the government exhibited towards the welfare of the people of the region; government pacification strategies which were primarily meant to keep the people perpetually silent, divided and disorientated; governmental policies and programmes directed at alleviating the horrible state of things in the Niger Delta region.

b. Formation of associations

Another effect of the crisis in the region manifested in the formation of associations and bodies which they believe will champion the cause of the indigenes. Prominent among such associations are the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni people (MOSOP) under the leadership of late Ken Saro Wiwa; the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), Niger Vigilante Movement, Niger Delta Strike, Peoples Salvation Front (PSF) and Niger Delta Peoples Volunteer Force (NDPVF). Some of the militant kingpins or leaders include Chief Government Ekemupolo, alias Tomopolo, Atake Tom, Mr. Fara Dagogo and Asari Dokubo (The Punch, 01/10/2009; The Nation, 06/10/2009).

c. Militancy or youth restiveness in the region

The scenario witnessed in the Niger Delta had also led to the youths taking recourse to all sorts of violence and armed struggle as part of their reactions to their deprivations and neglect of their areas. There was an increase in youth unrest in the area which had been traced to incursion of the oil industry and which had resulted in disturbing and disrupting oil operations in the area on various occasions. The need therefore to improve their lots probably explain why the youths in this area have been so restive.

d. Migration and displacement of the people

Oil industry induced migrations involve young men and girls in search of greener pastures in the major urban areas of the Niger Delta. Migration out of the oil-bearing enclave in the Niger Delta seem to be the major radical adaptable mechanism put in place by the people whose source of livelihood – faming, fishing, hunting, has been threatened by oil spills and gas flaring. The migrations consequently led to the displacement of the people.

e. Inflationary Trend

The presence of oil field workers in the various flow stations and locations in the Niger Delta seem to have negatively affected prices of goods and services which have skyrocketed beyond the reach of the common man; a situation which had been largely blamed on the activities of the oil workers who seem to always have some extra cash in relationship to their local folks and who often than not display their wealth in the market place. Aside the inflationary spiral set off by oil companies' workers, the market also experiences a scarcity of agricultural products since more people are abandoning their farms for wage labour and contract business in the oil industry.

Environmental impact of gas flaring

Apart from oil spillage and its attendant problems, the deleterious effect of gas flaring on the environment is enormous. Such deleterious effects of gas flaring according to Aghalino (2008) among others include: the depletion of the stratospheric ozone, which filters ultra-violent radiation to the earth; loss of enormous land due to gas flaring activities, acidic precipitation/acid rain problems, polluted and acidic rivers due to acid rain, the destruction of important economic and botanical plant species, noise and light pollution among others.

Challenges posed by the crisis to security

It is an obvious fact that the Niger Delta Environmental crisis posed great challenges to security and nation building process in the country. This could be substantiated under the following headings:

a. Insecurity of lives and properties in the region

There had been loss of lives in the area due to the high level of insecurity prevalent there. Lives of some of the personnel of the oil companies, the militants and officers of the Joint Task Force had been wasted to the crisis. Besides, a lot of properties of both the government and that of the oil companies had been vandalised by the militants over the years.

b. Security threat to governance at all levels

The crisis had made the region ungovernable and constitute an intractable problem to all levels of government represented in the region – the Federal, State and Local Governments who find it difficult to maintain peace due to the high level of anarchy and break down of law and order witnessed in the area.

It must be emphasised that the hanging of the environmental activists, Ken Saro Wiwa and the nine Ogoni activists, in 1995, by the then military Junta of Sanni Abacha, has merely added petrol to an already flaming fire as Nigeria since then has not witnessed a single moment of respite as far as the crisis in the region is concerned (Rafiu, 2008).

c. It interrupts steady flow of capital into the national treasury

The behavioural proclivities associated with the crisis such as vandalism of oil installations, sealing of production sites, hostage taking and demand for ransom etc. on the part of the militants in the region had a destabilising effect on the nation's economy which had depended on oil from the region. This has manifested in reduction in crude oil and gas production from the area.

It was also reported in *The Guardian* (October 17, 2007), that Nigeria lost 7.5 trillion Naira between 1999 and 2007 to the crisis in the oil rich region. It reported that Nigeria lost an average of 300,000 barrels per day in oil production since 1999 due to violence and instability in the region; and this translates to daily production loss of about \$18m, totaling about \$58.3 billion in 9 years.

The Way forward

The following recommendations will contribute towards solving the Niger Delta crisis if embarked upon:

First, there is need on the part of the government to be impartial and objectively tackle the issues that precipitated crisis in the region.

Also, the government should ensure that developmental agencies are not only set up but that they are well supervised, monitored and funded to be able to realise their objectives; while the indigenes of the region should not be sidelined while evolving developmental programmes (Nigerian Tribune, 2007; Oluwagbemi, 2007).

Moreso, there is need for an upward review of the tax paid for penalty for gas flared in Nigeria. This might go a long way to discourage incessant gas flaring; while optimal gas utilisation policy should also be implemented (Bankole, 2001). Adequate compensation should also be paid by the oil companies to the local communities for the environmental pollution of the region and this fee should not be hijacked by the government.

The Amnesty programme recently embarked upon is a right step in the right direction, though there is need for the government to reassess it and introduce

some level of integrity. But if amnesty is pursued without infrastructure and employment programmes, the government would have only empowered the militants to go back to the creeks in the nearest future. Thus, there is urgent need for the economic empowerment of the people. The government should build industrial parks, create employments and provide infrastructures that would metamorphose into super structures, put up good schools and establish a power sector; while funds approved for Niger Delta projects should be well managed and accounted for.

Moreso, the Niger Delta states should make meaningful contributions that should to some extent palliate the extreme deprivation that obtains presently in the region rather than leaving all developmental programmes in the region for the federal government.

The International Community should also put pressure on the Nigerian government to negotiate resource control in good faith, while there is urgent need for the youths in the region to desist from hostage taking and other violent activities as these have badly dented their image.

Finally, the current relative “peace” in the Niger Delta witnessed especially by the laying down of arms by the militants, offers golden opportunity for deep reflection by all the stakeholders who have roles to play in securing the armistice and propelling the region to growth and these include the Multinational Oil Companies, the Federal Government, Niger Delta States and the Niger Delta people and leaders.

Conclusion

In this paper, effort has been made to examine the Niger Delta environmental crisis and the challenges it posed to security in Nigeria. Specifically the paper examined the causes of the crisis, the dramatis personae and the various groups involved, the nature and pattern of the reaction of the indigenes to the crisis as well as the response of the government, the effects of the crisis and the challenges the crisis posed to security in the nation.

The paper also emphasised the ineffectiveness of force as a means of resolving conflicts, as demonstrated by the Federal Government’s initial use of force against the resistance of the people of the Niger Delta which proved to be a major source of the escalation of the conflict. It is against this background that the recent Amnesty programme of the Federal Government is seen as a right step in the right direction, as we believe that diplomacy is an

effective way of peaceful negotiation and subsequent resolution of the Niger Delta crisis.

It is advocated that for the current relative 'peace' witnessed in the region by the laying down of arms by the militants to the sustained, there is need for deep reflection by all the stakeholders who have roles to play in securing the armistice and propelling the region to growth and these include the Multinational Oil Companies, the Federal Government, Niger Delta States and the Niger Delta people and leaders.

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