



# Oil, Arms Proliferation and Conflict in the Niger Delta of Nigeria

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## **Abstract**

One of the biggest security challenges facing African states in the 1990s is the proliferation of small arms and light weapons. This development calls for serious attention from states and regional organisations as it has increased tension, and escalated as well as prolonged intra-state conflicts that have characterised Africa in the post-Cold War era. In Nigeria, the trade in small arms and light weapons has fuelled ethnic clashes in the Niger Delta, especially between the Ijaws and their immediate neighbours, the Itsekiri and Urhobos, as events in Warri have shown in recent times. This relatively novel situation aggravates the security problem in the Niger Delta, as the state struggles to address the perennial conflict in the oil-rich region. Given this background, the paper explores the origin of the present oil violence in the Niger Delta and how it has

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been intensified through the use of weapons that are primarily smuggled from Guinea-Bissau, Gabon and Cameroon. The paper concludes by making some suggestions as policy options for the resolution of the armed conflict in the Niger Delta, with specific reference to the problems of arms proliferation.

## Introduction

The proliferation of small and light weapons in the West African sub-region in the 1990s and its destabilising effect in hotspots of the region have drawn the attention of West African state and non-governmental organisations to the need to invent measures or mechanisms to halt the trend. Nigeria, a mega-state in Africa, has been plagued by a series of domestic conflicts arising from the policies of the state and/or those of the foreign oil companies as has been the case in the Niger Delta region. This region has over the years produced the bulk of national wealth but has paradoxically been marked by increased violence due to the negative effects of oil extraction and access to revenue derived from the sale of oil. Countrywide, the increased number of internal crises or conflicts has been subsequent to the proliferation of arms in the state, and has engendered the further proliferation of arms. Conflicts have been marked by the indiscriminate use of lethal weapons by local militias, the cumulative effect of which is the escalation of these conflicts. Several examples of these violent conflicts can be cited. They include the Maitatsine religious riots in Kano and Bauchi; religious riots in Kaduna; conflicts in Jos, the Zango-Kataf, Yoruba-Hausa/Fulani, Ife-Modakeke, Aguleri-Umuleri, Tiv-Junkun, Ijaw-Ilaje, Ijaw-Itsekiri, Urhobo-Itsekiri and Ijaw-Urhobo; and conflicts and the (near) perennial environmental crisis in the Niger Delta (Ojatorotu 2000:77).

The Niger Delta crisis encapsulates the various violent clashes between the ethnic groups in the region on the one hand, and the Federal Government (or the state) with its business partners, the multinational oil corporations (MNOCs) on the other (Obi 1999:433). Minority ethnic groups of the region have consequently challenged the state and foreign oil multinational policies and attitudes since the early 1990s. The Ijaw ethnic group, in particular, has appeared the most violent, aggressive and warlike when one considers how it has engaged

other major ethnic groups and oil multinationals in the Niger Delta. The military prowess of the Ijaw militia has proved a hard nut to crack, as state forces are faced with the herculean task of curbing the excesses or hyper-nationalist tendencies of the Ijaw militant youths. This has given rise to the militarisation of the region by both sides to the conflict, the federal government/oil multinationals and the people. Of course, the militarisation of the conflict is both a recipe for and a result of arms proliferation. State security forces and (ethnic) militias alike have procured weapons in bids to neutralise each other. At times, multinational oil companies have been indicted for their role in the militarisation of the Niger Delta through their procurement of weapons for state security forces. However, as at October 2006, the situation in the region is far from being resolved as it is easier to get a hand-made pistol than a loaf of bread and the number of hostage taken have tripled.

### **Proliferation of Arms in Local Conflicts: A Conceptual Background**

The sudden upsurge in the number of small arms and light weapons in the international system is basically a by-product of the Cold War during which the major powers blindly supported different belligerents in developing countries in Africa and elsewhere. Similarly, the dysfunctionalities of state structures in countries that comprise the former Soviet blocs as well as the course of globalisation increased the supply of small arms and light weapons in conflict zones of Africa. It is worrisome that, in recent years, especially since 1990s, major conflicts all over the world have been fought with both small arms and light weapons.<sup>1</sup> Many of these conflicts are fought, not between countries, but within them. And in most cases, internal wars are not fought by trained soldiers but by civilians in cities, towns and villages (*Awake* 2001:4). In some instances, teenagers and children are recruited or conscripted to fight and kill. This explains the presence

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1 Small arms include rifles and handguns that can be held by one person. Light weapons include machine guns, mortars and grenade launchers, which sometimes require two people to handle them.

of many 'child' soldiers in local conflicts or wars nowadays. In addition, it also explains why these fighters, with no military training, violate the traditional rules of war. Consequently, a greater percentage of victims of such wars are civilians. Suffice it to say that small arms and light weapons play a major role in all these conflicts. Although one may argue that these weapons do not directly cause conflict, their stockpiles may encourage fighting rather than negotiation and tend to prolong wars and intensify killings.

In the Nigerian context, recent developments in the Niger Delta region have shown that the proliferation of arms is partly responsible for the continuation of the conflict. This informed the inauguration of the national committee on the proliferation and illicit trafficking in small arms and light weapons in the year 2000 amid escalation of violence in the region. But it is rather intriguing that these arms are imported from the developed nations that at different international fora have argued for peace in Africa. The table below vividly illustrates the enormous resources expended by states of West Africa on small arms with the attendant effect of state militarisation. Like a chain reaction, this action of the states underlines militants' proclivity to smuggle small arms from neighbouring states of West Africa in exchange for oil to prosecute their cause.

<b>Importing ECOWAS<sup>2</sup> Country</b>	<b>Main Exporting Countries</b> (value in USD, years )	<b>Comments on Types of Small Arms and Light Weapons Traded</b>
<b>Benin</b>	France: USD 10,900 in 1999-2001	Revolvers and pistols, sporting rifles, and shotguns from France.
<b>Burkina Faso</b>	Italy: USD 865,315 in 1999-2002 Czech Republic: USD 155,384 in 1999-2001 France: USD 75,982 in 1999-2002	Italy reported exports of mainly cartridges, but also revolvers and pistols and sporting rifles.

2 Economic Community of West African States.

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<b>Cape Verde</b>	Czech Republic: USD 27,595 in 2001 Portugal: USD 13,101 in 1999-2001	Reported imports of revolvers and pistols.
<b>Côte d'Ivoire</b>	Spain: USD 76,391 in 2001 Italy: USD 60,550 in 1999-2001 US: USD 48,889 in 1999-2001 Czech Republic: USD 38,051 in 2001-2002 France: USD 27,886 in 1999-2001	Spain and the Czech Republic reported exports of only cartridges. Revolvers / pistols and shotguns, reported from Italy. Military weapons and cartridges reported from the US. France reported exports of mainly shotguns.
<b>The Gambia</b>	UK: USD 449,145 in 1999 Czech Republic: USD 120,961 in 1999-2002 Russia: USD 31,134 in 1999 Poland: USD 28,107 in 2000	UK reported exports of parts and accessories of military weapons, cartridges. Reported imports of cartridges from the Czech Republic, Russia and Poland.
<b>Ghana</b>	UK: USD 2,156,203 in 1999-2001 Cyprus: USD 2,093,385 in 1999-2001 Germany: USD 131,099 in 1999-2001 France: USD 52,909 in 1999	Spain's and France's reported exports consist of cartridges and the UK's of mainly cartridges. US reported exports mainly of shotguns, cartridges and military weapons. Cyprus and Germany report exporting mainly shotguns.
<b>Guinea</b>	France: USD 3,342,698 in 1999-2001 Spain: USD 1,563,183 in 1999-2001 UK: USD 325,601 in 1999 Portugal: USD 231,845 in 1999-2001 Germany: USD 83,358 in 1999-2001 Czech Republic: USD 15,391 in 1999	France exported cartridges, sporting rifles, military weapons, shotguns, and parts and accessories. Only cartridges exported from Spain and the UK. Portugal reported exporting cartridges and shotguns. Only shotguns from Germany. Czech Republic reported exporting cartridges.

<b>Guinea - Bissau</b>	Portugal: USD 332,054 in 1999-2001 Spain: USD 168,912 in 2000-2001 France: USD 104,620 in 1999-2002	Portugal reported exports of cartridges, shotguns, revolvers / pistols, and sporting rifles. Spain and France reported exports of cartridges.
<b>Liberia</b>	Under UN embargo, no imports therefore authorised	
<b>Mali</b>	France: USD 72,327 in 1999-2002	France reported exports of mainly parts and accessories.
<b>Niger</b>	France: USD 92,134 in 1999-2002 Italy: USD 60,643 in 1999-2001	Reported imports of revolvers, shotguns, parts and accessories, and cartridges from France; France reported exporting sporting rifles, cartridges, and shotguns. Reported imports of shotguns from Italy; Italy reported exporting revolvers
<b>Nigeria</b>	US: USD 246,007 in 1999-2002 UK: USD 90,953 in 1999-2002 Italy: USD 49,074 in 2001 Germany: USD 13,062 in 1999	US reported exporting mainly cartridges. Germany reported exporting revolvers / pistols. UK reported exporting shotguns, cartridges and parts. Italy reported exporting revolvers and shotguns.
<b>Senegal</b>	France: USD 2,246,810 in 1999-2002 US: USD 959,420 in 1999-2002 Spain: USD 426,508 in 2000-2002 Italy: USD 232,992 in 1999-2002 Germany: USD 116,770 in 1999-2002 Czech Republic: USD 81,996 in 2001-2002	Only cartridges from Spain. Mainly revolvers and cartridges from Germany. Diversified imports from France, US and Italy. Cartridges, revolvers / pistols and shotguns from the Czech Republic.

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<b>Sierra Leone</b> (Only rebels are under UN embargo)	US: USD 29,542 in 2001 Spain: USD 13,398 in 2001 UK: USD 10,139 in 2000	US reported exports of parts and accessories. Spain and the UK reported exports of cartridges.
<b>Togo</b>	Spain: USD 41,212 in 2000	Spain reported exporting cartridges.

Adapted from Cross et al 2004.

If the weapons employed in modern wars are small and light, the fact remains that they have brought heavy consequences. They have crippled war-torn or conflict-prone societies politically, socially, economically and environmentally (*Awake* 2001:4). And the cost to the international community has been huge in terms of the provision of emergency relief, assistance to refugees, peacekeeping and military intervention. Therefore, it will be worthwhile to find out why small and light weapons have become the main instruments of domestic warfare in recent years and how they are acquired. One of the reasons has to do with the relationship between conflict and poverty. It is surprising that most of the wars fought since the 1990s have taken place in countries that are poor, too poor to acquire sophisticated weapons. Yet, small arms and light weapons have increasingly found their way into these countries simply because they are cheaper. Moreover, these weapons are simply given away by militaries that are downsizing. In addition, national governments often sponsor rebel groups and guerrilla fighters in other countries with these weapons, sometimes in exchange for access to mining sites. A case in point is Charles Taylor's support for rebels in Sierra Leone in order to gain access to the country's diamond fields under rebels' control during the civil war in that country in recent years.

The destructive potential of small arms proliferation has never been in doubt. Small weapons are lethal, but easy to use. A single rapid-fire assault rifle can fire hundreds of rounds a minute. They are rugged and remain operational for years. In addition, they are easily transported and concealed. Having said that, the complex global traffic in arms is of much concern, as they pass across borders legally and illegally. Legally, these weapons pass from nation to nation.

Immediately after the Cold War, armies in both the Eastern and Western blocs reduced their size, and governments gave or sold excess equipment to friends and allies. For instance, since 1995, the United States alone has given away more than 3 million rifles, pistols, machine guns, and grenade launchers (*Awake* 2001:6).

The illegal trade in small weapons is carried out in black markets where they are purchased by rebel groups, paramilitary groups and local militias, sometimes not with money, but with gold, diamonds and other strategic minerals seized from their mines. There appears to be little difficulty in making a distinction between legal and illegal sales of weapons. One fact is that weapons that are now regarded as illegal were once sold legally. In other words, weapons that were legally sold to national armed forces and the police are stolen and/or sold illegally, only to re-appear in the black market. Therefore, crime and violence are usually the end results of wars. After wars, guns find their way into the hands of criminals. In this way, there is a shift from politically motivated violence to criminal violence. Nowadays, military-type assault rifles and pistols are commonly used in robberies and assassinations. Therefore, the knowledge that criminals are armed with guns is the beginning of fear and insecurity. Since the use of sophisticated arms in the current Niger Delta crisis cannot be discussed in isolation, this paper has conceptualised arms proliferation in local wars and hopes to analyse the nature of the crisis, as well as to present a picture of the armed resistance in the Niger Delta.

### **Understanding the Niger Delta Conflict**

The present geo-politics of Nigeria's Delta region concerns nine states, namely Akwa-Ibom, Bayelsa, Delta, Rivers, Ondo, Edo, Cross Rivers, Imo and Abia, all of which account for over eighty per cent of Nigeria's oil reserves or deposits. In terms of demographics, ethnic minority groups such as the Ijaw, Urhobo, Itskiri, Isoko, Kalabari, Nokws, Ndom, Ogoni, Efik, Annang and many others inhabit the area (Obi 1999:436). Since the successful discovery of oil in Oloibiri in 1956 by Shell D'Archy (making history as Nigeria's first commercial oil well), the Nigerian Delta has produced the bulk of Nigeria's oil. By 1958, Nigeria became an oil exporter with a production level of about 6 000 barrels



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per day, with other MNOCs like Mobil, Elf Aquitaine, Chevron and Agip joining Shell in mining activities in the region (Ibeanu 2000:21). In the 1970s, production reached a peak of two million barrels per day. This is in sharp contrast to the present day (Ibeanu 2000:21). Presently, Nigeria is the fifth largest producer of crude oil in the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC).

Today, the Nigerian economy is a monocultural one, as it has remained oil-based since the 1970s. This is a remarkable departure from the situation in the 1960s when oil accounted for an insignificant proportion of government revenue (Amu 1998:3). But today, oil production has become central to the survival of the Nigeria state (Ibeanu 2000:21). By legislation, the Nigerian state owns and controls the production of all mineral deposits in the country, including crude oil. Similarly, the central government controls all revenues derived from crude oil and designs a distribution formula in sharing these among the tiers of government. The irony of oil and gas production in Nigeria, however, lies in the fact that while it is beneficial to both the Nigerian state and its business partners (the MNOCs), it has brought a lot of woes and sufferings to the oil-bearing communities in the Niger Delta. This situation can be explained from a number of perspectives.

First, mining activities in the Niger Delta have adversely affected the ecosystem of the region, resulting in serious environmental degradation. Indeed, the degradation that oil production has caused in the Niger Delta environment is a yardstick for understanding the dynamics of the conflict in the region. The destruction of the Niger Delta environment can be attributed to a number of factors relating to the production of crude oil in the region. High-pressure pipelines carrying crude oil, diesel and gas have been constructed all over the oil-bearing communities. These, however are rarely maintained by the government or the oil companies. Such neglect of these pipelines and other oil installations often results in spills and leakages which destroy wildlife, farmlands, forests, aquatic and human lives. Apart from the foregoing, these spills sometimes result in fire incidents whereby many lives are lost. Examples are the fire incidents in Egorode (Ola & Eighemheberio 1998),<sup>3</sup> and Jesse (*The Guardian* 2000a:15)

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3 For further reports on this issue, see Urhobo Historical Society Website:  
<<http://www.waado.com>>.

in Delta state, in 1998 and 2000 respectively, and the Onicha-Amiyi Uhu fire incident in Abia State in 2003 (*Daily Champion* 2003).

Oil companies and the government *usually* abdicate their responsibility by claiming that the spills are caused by the vandalisation of the pipelines by the local communities, their sole aim being to steal petroleum products. In addition, discharge from refining activities into fresh water sources and farmlands devastate the environment and threaten human lives because they contain excessive amounts of toxic materials. Similarly, constant gas flaring affects wildlife and human life negatively. Moreover, badly constructed canals and causeways for the purpose of mining activities have adversely affected the hydrology of the region, causing floods in some areas and inadequate water in others. In some cases, these artificial waterways allow saline water into sources of fresh water, resulting in scarcity of drinking water and the killing of many plants and water animals.

Aside from the environmental degradation of the Niger Delta, there are other sources of conflict in the region. At the heart of the conflict is the perception of the oil minorities that they have been cheated, neglected, marginalised and alienated in the distribution of the wealth of the oil produced from lands and waters (Obi 1999). The oil minorities have complained of lack of health care facilities, poor infrastructure, unemployment and endangered livelihood. In addition, they have argued that the wealth from their lands and waters is being used in developing big cities and areas in other parts of the country where oil is not produced. These perceptions and the resulting frustration caused the people of the Niger Delta to take up arms against the oil companies and the government.

Another source of conflict in the Niger Delta has to do with politics and nationalism. This point is partly illustrated by the process of creating local government areas and/or the locating of headquarters for such council areas. In 1997, when General Sani Abacha created additional local government areas, crisis erupted in Warri and its environs. The relocation of the headquarters of the newly created Warri South Local Government from Ogbе-Ijoh to Ogidighben stirred a protracted war between the Ijaws and the Itsekiris. The repercussions of this administrative fiat persist till today. Not to be overlooked is the hypernationalist tendency of the Ijaw ethnic group. The Ijaws have waged a number of wars on their neighbouring ethnic groups over land ownership and other related issues. Thus, they have clashed with the Ilajes, the Itsekiris and the Urhobos to

mention but a few, (in recent years). Even during the present democratic dispensation, violent conflicts continue to occur across the Niger Delta, both between governments and communities, and among communities themselves. Since the advent of the incumbent government, conflicts have erupted in Bonny (which delayed the huge liquefied gas project there), Eleme, Okrika, Oleh, Choba and Odi. Therefore, Niger Delta conflict, in recent years, is a result not only of issues of environmental importance but also of some political and nationalist motives.

### **Armed Violence in the Niger Delta: The Case of the Ogoni and Ijaw**

Since the early 1990s, there has been a remarkable presence of many resistance movements in the Niger Delta region. Notably among these are the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP), the Ijaw Youth Council (IYC), the Ijaw National Congress (INC), the Egbesu Boys of Africa (EBA), the Niger Delta Volunteer Force (NDVF), the Ijaw Nationality Rights Protection Organisation (INRPO) and the Ogoni Patriotic Union (OPU), to mention but a few. These movements have been at the vanguard of local protests and demonstrations against the Nigerian state and the multinational corporations in recent years. The vibrancy and militant tendencies of these groups are fundamentally due to the hardships engendered by economic and environmental crises, and state repression (Obi 2001:6). These groups, with militant leaders, have been able to place their demands on the national agenda as well as before the international community, attracting massive support at both the local and international levels (Obi 1999:433). An analysis of the relationship between the Nigerian state and the Ogonis and Ijaws, two prominent ethnic minorities in the Niger Delta, will provide a useful illustration of state violence and armed local resistance by ethnic militia.

### **The Ogoni Struggle**

The Ogoni struggle typically exemplifies the nature and dynamics of the crisis as well as local resistance in the Niger Delta region. It is an ethnic struggle

championed by MOSOP to protect the interests of the Ogoni ethnic group (Ojatorotu 2000:81). The Ogoni struggle assumed phenomenal dimensions in 1990 with the declaration of the Ogoni Bill of Rights (OBR), which the Ogoni leaders presented to the then military junta of General Ibrahim Babangida. As contained in the OBR, the Ogoni people demanded:

- Political control of Ogoni affairs
- The right to control and use a fair proportion of Ogoni economic resources for Ogoni development
- The right to protect the Ogoni environment and ecology from further degradation
- Adequate and direct representation in all Nigerian national institutions (Sha'aba 1998:79, MOSOP 1992).

In August 1991, another section was added to the OBR. This authorised MOSOP to internationalise the struggle by the Ogonis, and it affirmed MOSOP's methods and commitment to non-violence. In December 1992, the Ogoni people presented an ultimatum to the oil companies operating in Ogoni land (including Shell and Chevron) and the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC) to pay back royalties and compensation within 30 days or quit Ogoniland (MOSOP 1992). After the expiration of the ultimatum, on 4 January 1993, about 300 000 people staged a peaceful demonstration to give vent to their demands. This unprecedented demonstration was a milestone in the Ogoni struggle in two important ways. First, it transformed the Ogoni question into a national issue. Second, it attracted the sympathy and attention of the international community to the plight of the Ogoni people. However, what followed this historic demonstration was a spate of arrests and detention of MOSOP leaders by the state security forces.

Between January and December 1993, Ken Saro-Wiwa and other prominent Ogoni leaders were arrested and detained several times, with criminal charges brought against them (Human Rights Watch 1995). Meanwhile, the government had devised a method of 'divide and rule' in order to weaken the Ogoni struggle. This tactic had a number of dimensions. First, it 'encouraged' violent conflicts between the Ogoni and their neighbours, which resulted in ethnic and

communal clashes. There was an attempt to dub the clashes as purely ethnic, thereby indicting the MOSOP leadership in the process. The use of sophisticated weapons and standard military tactics in all these ethnic clashes was evidently enough to prove the involvement of military (Sha'aba 1998:82). For instance, it was reported by Human Rights Watch/Africa (HRA) that soldiers were recruited from Liberia to fight and kill Ogoni people under the pretext that they were going to fight in the Cameroon (*The Punch* 1997). Second, the Giokoo Accord of March 1994, which called for the Gokiana people to pull out of MOSOP, is another case in point. Government had allegedly induced some conservative Gokiana chiefs to sign this Accord. However, Gokiana people demonstrated spontaneously against this Accord in many Gokiana villages on 19 May 1994.

Following the shooting and killing of about eleven Ogoni people by security agents at Brass, old Rivers State, in April 1993, the military junta of Babangida passed a decree, which stipulated the death penalty for all acts of treason. The Ogoni responded with increased mobilisation and a media campaign, with a possible option of violent resistance. However, this strategy later became a divisive factor in the rank and file of MOSOP and its leadership. After the controversial MOSOP boycott of the 12 June 1993 presidential election, it became clear that there had been a division of its leadership into two – the moderates led by Dr Leton, and the militants led by Ken Saro-Wiwa. Apart from accusing Saro-Wiwa of being too confrontational, militant and authoritarian, the moderates also alleged that he was planning to kill thirteen Ogoni leaders, of whom four were indeed killed in May 1994. It is instructive to note that Saro-Wiwa had campaigned from village to village on the need for redress from the government, based on the marginalisation of the Ogoni ethnic group in the national scheme of affairs. This campaign took him to Giokoo village on 21 May 1994, where some conservative chiefs (allegedly being sponsored by government) were meeting. Violence erupted during his visit and during the ensuing mayhem the four chiefs were killed.

Subsequently, Ken Saro-Wiwa and several other Ogoni activists were arrested and detained in connection with the murder of the four prominent Ogoni chiefs. They were later arraigned before a special military tribunal, which sentenced Saro-Wiwa and eight others to death by hanging. Eventually, the execution was carried out on 10 November 1995 despite all entreaties both from

within and outside the country. This development sounded the death knell of the Ogoni struggle. However, this is not to say that the struggle atrophied, but it certainly lost the vibrancy and militancy associated with it in its early stage. This was not only due to state repression but also to leadership bickering.

### **The Ijaw Wars and the Use of Deadly Arms**

Having lost the steam in their leadership of the struggle of the people of the Niger Delta, the Ogoni people have given way to the Ijaw, who have increasingly taken the centre stage. Since 1997, when Ijaw youths called for an end to Shell activities in the Niger Delta, Ijaw people have resolved to fight to the last man until the Niger Delta is liberated from the pangs of exploitation, neglect and marginalisation (*The Guardian on Sunday* 2000:38-39). Bayelsa State, which is inhabited by the Ijaw people, was a hot bed of Ijaw militancy between 1998 and 1999. The militant and invincible Egbesu Boys came into limelight in 1998 when they set free their detained leader from Government House in Yenegoa, having disarmed the guards. The emergence of the Egbesu warriors since then has demonstrated the militarisation of local conflict in which sophisticated arms have been freely deployed by militant youths.

After the death of General Abacha in 1998, the new political climate made it possible for Ijaw youths to be more vigorous in their demands. To drive home their grouses, they added a new twist to the struggle, namely, the hijacking of oil installations. On 11 December 1998, Ijaw youths at Kaiama town made a landmark declaration, now known as the Kaiama Declaration. In the document, they requested greater local control of oil revenues and better environmental policies. More importantly, the statement gave a December 30 ultimatum to both the government and the oil companies to respond positively to their demands. It added that if the deadline was not met, all multilateral oil corporations operating in Ijaw land (and territorial waters), and indeed in the larger Niger Delta, should close their operations and vacate the region (Niboro 1998). To actualise their threat, Ijaw youths and other people who joined them marched in peaceful demonstration to the Government House in Yenagoa. Their main purpose was to convey their grievances through the state governor, Lt Col Paul Obi to the

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Federal Government. However, state security forces opened fire on the protesters, leaving some of them dead and many others injured in the pandemonium. This marked the beginning of armed hostilities between Ijaw youths and the security forces which have continued till today. The unfettered access to small arms which are readily available has contributed to escalating the conflict.

Following this ugly incident, the Egbesu Boys regrouped, apparently ready for war, having been in possession of sophisticated weapons of war. They engaged both the navy and the army in fierce battles, with heavy casualties on both sides. In some cases, the militant youths ransacked military formations, terrorised fleeing soldiers and policemen and became warlords in strategic locations. Indeed, the towns of Kaiama, Odi, Ekeki and others had become battlefields where the Egbesu Boys and military forces engaged in heavy cross-fire. Apart from this, the militant youths were able to close down a number of oil installations in the Niger Delta, thereby grounding oil production. In response to the events in the Niger Delta, General Abdulalami Abubakar read the riot act on 1 January 1999 in which he reiterated government's intolerance of the scenario developing in the Niger Delta. This was followed by further reinforcement of the navy and the army with heavy artillery and armoured tanks. Rather than halting the spectre of war in the Niger Delta, increased deployment of armed forces to the Niger Delta has continued to aggravate the situation. And, in apparent continuation of government's militarisation process, President Olusegun Obasanjo in November 1999 ordered an army invasion of Odi, a town in Bayelsa State in response to the killing of about eleven policemen who had earlier been sent to the area to quell riots. The police convoy was ambushed and the policemen were killed. The reprisal and destruction of Odi was so enormous that former Bayelsa State Governor, Diepriye Alamiyeseigha, once stated that it would require about twenty-five billion Naira to reconstruct the town (*The Guardian* 2000c:6).

Despite the increasing deployment of government forces to the Niger Delta, Ijaw militant youths have not relented in their armed struggle against the government and oil companies operating in the oil region. For instance, they have continued to attack and shut down oil installations, and hold oil workers hostage. In June 1999, Ijaw youths hijacked a helicopter belonging to Shell at Dokolaba, Delta State, and kidnapped its pilots (*The Guardian* 1999b:3).

In September 2000, about twelve Shell workers were kidnapped at Ogoda, Delta State, by aggrieved youths (*The Guardian* 2000b:64). As indicated earlier, the Ijaw wars have not been limited to oil-related issues alone. The wars being fought by the Ijaws against some of their neighbours have much to do with politics, land ownership and ethnic nationalism. In all of these wars, access to self-determination was crucial to their demands.

In 1997, when General Sani Abacha's military junta created more local government areas in the country, the Ijaws placed a paid advertisement in daily newspapers, in which they complained severely about the injustice they had suffered from the Olu of Warri (the traditional ruler of one of the cities in the Niger Delta) and the Itsekiris in general (*The Guardian* 1997:40-41). They narrated the various ways in which the Itsekiris had prevented them from having their own local government that would incorporate all Ijaws. Their grouses were born out of the spirited attempts by the Olu of Warri and the Itsekiris to relocate the headquarters of the newly-created Warri South Local Government from Ogbe-ijo (an Ijaw town) to an Itsekiri locality. Corroborating their suspicion, the headquarters were eventually relocated to Ogidigben, an Itshekiri town. This unstatesmanlike act (as the Ijaw saw it) by the then military governor of Delta state, Colonel John Dungs, was the last straw that broke the camel's back. Armed confrontation ensued between the Ijaws, (who were on the offensive), and the Itsekiris.

Many lives were lost and property worth several millions of Naira destroyed during the conflict. The feud between the two ethnic groups persists till today. At present, the Ijaws are still embroiled in armed confrontation with the Itsekiris over land ownership. Just recently, it was reported that some militant Ijaw youths struck at Ogbe-ijoh, the headquarters of the newly-created Warri South-West, and abducted the chairman, that is the executive head, of the local government (*The Punch* 2003:5). They carried out their mission by shooting sporadically to scare people away. As the war between the Ijaws and their neighbour still rages on, government is unrelenting in its efforts to bring sanity into the oil-rich region. Government troops have been deployed to the areas with sophisticated combat weapons. Since most of the fighting takes place on water, the navy has brought in sub-marine artilleries. However, all these have not achieved the desired result, namely, peace in the Delta region. The



armed confrontations between government forces and Ijaw militant youths have rendered the Niger Delta a battle ground. Casualties are being recorded on both sides, and it seems as if government forces are not yet capable of overcoming the Ijaw military prowess. For instance, the dexterity with which the Ijaw fighters confront the navy and mount blockades on water against naval forces shows that they are die-hard warriors who have adequate and sophisticated arms at their disposal.

### **Conclusion: The Way Forward**

The increasing spate of armed violence in the Niger Delta crisis is a function of related fundamental issues that generated the crisis in the first place. Therefore, it follows that any attempt aimed at addressing this dangerous trend is a call for finding solutions to the fundamental issues that form the bedrock of the crisis in the oil-bearing region. In other words, the problem of indiscriminate use of arms by ethnic militia in the Niger Delta will continue to defy solutions for a long time to come if the causes of the crisis are left unaddressed. Guns in the hands of militant youth will continue to exacerbate the problem until more basic solutions are found. In view of this development, some solutions can be suggested as policy options for policy makers and other stakeholders.

The recent national conference is a giant stride towards addressing the incessant violence in the region because all stakeholders in the polity came together and discussed the future of the Nigerian state. But it was limited in scope as it was masterminded by the state executive. Although both the majority and the minority put heads together to fashion out a workable machinery for restructuring the country in such a way that each section of the country would have its own fair share of available opportunities, it fell short of addressing the fundamental problems of Nigerian federalism. The fundamental questions of Nigerian federalism still stand unresolved, and can only be addressed in a sovereign national conference. At present, Nigerian federalism is skewed, and it does not adequately cater for the interests of the minority. This question of federalism must be an integral part of the project to create a true democracy, good governance, an enhanced position of ethnic minorities and transparent fiscal control.

Government should devise a workable environmental policy that would regulate oil operations in the Niger Delta. The destruction of the ecosystem of the region by the activities of oil companies has for years remained an important issue in the Niger Delta question. Setting up environmental agencies is not enough. Government should enact laws that would protect the environment from being degraded, polluted and damaged by activities of all sorts. In addition, effective machinery should be put in place to ensure the strict enforcement of such laws. In the case of the MNOCs, they should be made to be responsible to the local people in their operations. Government should not compromise the welfare and survival of its citizens because of its profit-motivated partnership with the oil companies. A situation whereby government protects the oil companies against its own citizens, and oil companies cast themselves as neutral in the conflict between government and the people, does not help matters. Local people continue to associate oil companies with government, either in a good or a bad light. This is why it is necessary for the oil companies to review their relationship with government and be closer and accountable to the local oil-bearing communities.

Besides, adequate compensation should be paid to the (affected) local communities as a continuous exercise. However, compensation in this sense does not mean putting money into the pockets of the people. Recent events in the Niger Delta have shown that persons in leadership positions in many oil communities have compromised their struggle for selfish motives or monetary gains. Some elites and leaders in these communities have become compensation entrepreneurs, who devise different methods in claiming compensation or grants from government, oil companies and international relief agencies. At times, government and oil company officials collaborate with these greedy leaders in this 'compensation game'. The tragedy of this development is that monetary compensation collected in such a way only ends in certain private pockets excluding the majority of ordinary local citizens. Monetary compensation to individuals and middle men should be de-emphasised. Instead, government and the oil companies should embark on community development projects, which are agreed on by the local residents. Schools, scholarship schemes, hospitals, a good transportation system, electricity, gainful employment, good telecommunications, and a drinkable water supply should be adequately provided in

the communities. This is the only way by which the ordinary people in the Niger Delta could benefit from compensation.

Furthermore, there should be a master development plan for the Niger Delta. Interestingly, government has taken a giant stride in this direction. When General Abdulsalam Abubakar took over the reins of power in 1998, he set up a 22-member committee headed by Major-General Oladayo Popoola. This committee was to appraise various recommendations made to the government on how to tackle the festering crisis in the Niger Delta and produce practical plans for their implementation (*The Guardian* 1999a:20). In its report, a total financial outlay of about fifteen billion Naira was to be devoted to the building of basic infrastructure such as marine transportation, telecommunications and electricity supply (*The Guardian* 1999a:20). Apart from this, the present democratic regime of President Olusegun Obasanjo has gone further in addressing the Niger Delta question. In 2000, the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) was set up to replace the Oil Minerals Producing Areas Development Commission (OMPADEC). In addition, the revenue derivation formula of the Niger Delta and other oil-producing areas outside the region has been increased to 13%.

However, these measures have not gone far enough in dealing with the more fundamental demands for the control of oil resources by the oil minorities. At present, there is raging agitation in the Niger Delta for control of local resources. The agitators have posited that Nigeria is the only country in the world, which has so cruelly plundered its oil-producing districts without any policy of compensation and repatriation of profits (*The Guardian* 1999a:20). In view of these recent developments in the Niger Delta, government needs to appraise its policy in tackling the problems in the region. Dialogue should be embarked upon by both government and the oil communities in the Niger Delta. The present crisis in the region is partly being fuelled by the lingering militarist disposition on both sides. The Nigerian political life has been militarised for several years since independence, mostly by military rule. This military phenomenon has inculcated a culture of violence in the society. The frequent deployment of military forces to the Niger Delta to quell local riots in recent years has equally militarised local ethnic militia. Even, the present democratic government has continued in that destructive militarist path, as the recent

invasion of the Niger Delta by military forces has shown. Therefore, in order to stem this tide of violence and armed confrontation in the region, government should systematically de-emphasise the use of maximum force, and engage the aggrieved communities in meaningful dialogue. However, this could only be achieved by tolerance from both sides.

There is also the serious question about the leadership in the Niger Delta struggle. As noted earlier, some leaders in the oil-bearing communities have compromised the interests of their own people in order to achieve selfish ends. The opportunism and greed of such leaders tend to destabilise resistance movements or weaken collective agitations. This factor was responsible for the destabilisation of the Ogoni struggle. Ogoni leaders were essentially interested in personal power and money. As a matter of fact, some Niger Delta leaders, like some leaders at other levels of national life, are greedy and compromised. They find it easier to line their pockets with compensations from the oil companies than to fight a principled and courageous battle for repatriations that would make a real difference in the lives of their people. It is not surprising then that youths in several communities have come out publicly to denounce their leaders, saying that they represent themselves, not the people. Therefore, in order to appear realistic, determined and resolute in their struggle, the people of the Niger Delta should lay their trust in the hands of leaders of proven integrity and good records.

Another part of the conflict in the Niger Delta has to do with the creation of viable local political entities. Three main ethnic groups in the region – the Ijaw, the Urhobo and the Itsekiri – are engaged in nearly constant armed confrontations with one another over land ownership and the creation of local government. Therefore, government should ensure that separate local governments are created to reflect the composition and origins of these warring ethnic groups in order to stem the tide of politically motivated conflicts in these areas.

Finally, the rate at which small arms flow into the country is alarming. This increasing spate of illegal trafficking in arms not only suggests that the borders are porous, but also portends a great danger to the corporate existence of the nation in future. Government should take up this issue as a matter of national concern. It should ensure that the borders, both on land and sea, are effectively monitored and well policed. All loopholes that may favour illegal trafficking in arms should be plugged.

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