



YOUTH UNREST IN THE NIGER DELTA REGION: AN INSIGHT INTO THE CAUSES AND SOLUTIONS

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ABSTRACT: The Niger Delta region constitutes a sizeable population of such states as Bayelsa, Delta, Ondo, Rivers, Edo and the Cross Rivers states respectively. This is where the bulk of the nation's oil wealth is derived. In spite of this, the region has had to deal with a long period of environmental degradation, military attacks and intimidations, extortions by the multinational oil companies aided by the state apparatus. All these led to the Kaiama Declaration of December 11, 1998 where the youth of the area sought for a full and total control of the proceeds of the resources from the region. This degenerated into an open conflict between the youth and the federal government resulting in mass killings, maiming, destruction of properties and dehumanization of an unimaginable proportion. This paper examines the political, economic, environmental and other issues arising from the oil exploratory activities of the multinational companies and the attendant restiveness of the youth in the region and suggests possible and enduring solution to the crisis.

Key Words: Oil Wealth, Niger Delta, Multinational, Youth, Environmental Degradation

JEL Classifications: J13, O13, P28

Introduction

The Niger Delta bears the oil mineral resources that sustain the Nigerian state today; the Niger Delta issue has been attributed to decades of political and economic marginalization as well as neglect of the region by successive governments in Nigeria. The Niger Delta in spite of its natural endowment depicts a paradox as the picture of the region is shrouded in mysteries. This is better appreciated if considered against the backdrop of

the failure of oil to positively impact the region. This has been the crux of the agitation that has come to be known as the Niger Delta struggle. Oil and the politics that follow have therefore assured the status of the national politics of contestation and squabbles.

The above scenario is in the mid-sixties, a young Nigerian named Isaac Adaka Boro from Kaiama Town in the present Bayelsa State, surprised the Nigerian government authorities when he took arms in

protest that the area whose land produces the crude oil and from which the country reaps the petrodollars, was getting less than its fair share of the oil money. He argued that the people deserved to get much more (Gavin, 1990:31).

The oil wealth from their backyard accounts for over 90 percent of Nigeria's revenue, and almost all of it is being used in building dams, highways, and edifices in other parts of the country. According to Nwokoh (1998:17), all around is poverty, staring anybody who cares to see in the face. And since the government seems elusive, the oil companies have become the ready targets of angry and unemployed youths in the Niger Delta. The remaining part of this paper discusses the problems of youth unrest in the Niger Delta with emphasis on the role of the multinational companies and the consequences of oil exploration and exploitation. Some suggestions are also offered for ameliorating the problems.

The Niger Delta Region in Perspective

Prior to the discovery of oil in Nigeria, the Nigerian economy thrived on the basis of agriculture. Then, the economy was greatly supported by the complimentary role agricultural produce such as groundnut, oil palm and cocoa played in the nation's economic life. Though agriculture at this time cannot be said to have ushered in

development in the country; it however provided sufficient products that made Nigeria self-sustained in those agricultural products. The complementary role these products played and the internal linkages that they engendered among the various sectors of the economy were adequate signs that an agro-based Nigerian economy would apart from leaving her land fertile also brought about foreign exchange and capital to develop the prostrate economy.

The story however, changed when oil was discovered and the petroleum industry came into being; oil wealth has now assumed the main foreign exchange earner thereby relegating the agricultural sector to the background. In fact, the productive sector also suffered untold neglect thus making Nigeria a mono-sectoral economy that solely relied on oil wealth which is prone to the vagaries of instability at the international oil market. Now the Nigerian oil wealth is about 90% of her Gross National Product. Despite the oil wealth, Nigeria remains underdeveloped in relation to her oil resources. The Niger Delta region, the focus of this paper has been worst hit in terms of the neglect suffered by the region as a result of the activities of the multinational oil companies and the Nigerian state security apparatus.

Since 1990, the Niger Delta area has been a military stationed-zone following the massacre at Umuechemf, an oil community in Etche during a violent protest against

oil exploitation in the community. The effect of this is that every part of the Niger Delta came under the command of the military high command (Anneji, 1999:41).

When oil was discovered in 1956 in Oloibiri community of Beyelsa State and Ogoni community, exploration of this oil started in 1958 by foreign multinational oil companies such as Shell D'Arg-Aglo/Dutch Company, Agip, etc., who paid mining rents and royalties to the federal government through the promulgation of some petroleum laws. This has been said to be the major constraint of the oil companies to actually show better concern to their host communities (Dakolo, 1998:31). In the late 1950s, contractual changes were made in the petroleum industry in a historical perspective. The era of plenary rights covering extensive privileges on companies ended in 1958, with the enactment of the Minerals Act. This Act was later reinforced by the Petroleum Act of 1969 which introduced the notion of state ownership of hydrocarbon resources. The provision of the 1969 Petroleum Act reads: "The entire ownership and control of all petroleum in, under or upon and any lands which this section applies shall be vested in the state (here, meaning the federation of Nigeria" (Atsegbua, 1993:94).

The independent constitution of 1960 and the Republican Constitution of 1963 empowered the federal government to pay each region 50

percent of the royalties and mining rents derived from it area. The 50 percent was reduced to 20 percent after the overthrow of General Yakubu Gowon in 1975. These rights were completely taken away by the 1978 Land Use Decree and 1979 Constitution, both of which received General Olusegun Obasanjo's assent. The Land Use Decree of 1978 vested the ownership and control of all land in Nigeria on the state governor (FGN, 1978). Section 42, subsection 3 of the 1979 Constitution states that:

The entire property in and control of all minerals, mineral oil and natural gas in, under or upon the territorial waters and the exclusive zone of Nigeria shall vest in the government of the federation and shall be managed in such manner as may be prescribed by the National Assembly (FGN, 1979).

Consequently, the federal government has continued to collect all royalties, mining rents and petroleum profit tax paid by the oil companies (Oronto, 1999:19). An environmental lawyer and Deputy Director of Environmental Rights Action noted that the provisions of the Act negate the principle of independence of communities that make up the ethnic nationalities in these areas. He posited that there was hardly any policy that has engendered as much concern and controversy than the Land Use Decree of 1978 under President

Olusegun Obasanjo.

President Shehu Shagari's administration in sympathy with the oil producing communities over their deplorable condition of living made some symbolic promises to provide the people of Ogbia and Oloibiri with water, electricity, road and the construction of an oil museum (Dibie, 2000:16). Through the life of that administration, no appreciable impact was shown to these communities both by the federal government and the oil companies operating in these areas. So, when people are pushed to the wall, they damn all consequences and take to violence (David-West, 2006:14). Their grievances are primarily centred around neglect, injustices, armed insurgence and corruption. It is against these backgrounds that they demanded for reparation, control of the oil resources or complete stoppage of oil exploration and withdrawal of stationed armed men in their community that has earned them a wide currency of genocide (Akinyele, 2006:14).

The Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP) was formed in 1989. The Ogoni episode peaked in November 1995 with the hanging of Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight other MOSOP activists following their conviction by a special military tribunal for their alleged murder of four Ogoni chiefs. It was this concern that led Timi Kaiser-William Ogoriba and three others to establish the Movement for the

Survival of the Ijaw Ethnic in the Niger-Delta (MOSIEND). According to Ogoriba (1998:18)

We found out that the elders in our community in whose hands we reposed our confidence tended towards a derailment in our march towards total emancipation of our people. MOSIEND therefore, is prepared to provide succor for the neglected IZONS in the Niger Delta, knowing that what the federal government gets from the area by way of resource is what sustains the Nigerian economy without the people of the area getting anything in return.

The Ijaw National Congress (INC) and its Youth Movement in collaboration with MOSIEND signed and adopted the Kaiama Declaration of December 11, 1998, which claimed ownership of all natural resources found in Ijaw territory. The military crackdown in the communities of Bayelsa State in December 1998 and early January 1999 led to the death of several people, numbering hundreds; the torture and inhuman treatment of others; and the arbitrary detention of many more, while some were summarily executed (Suberu, 2000:16).

In justifying the deployment of warships and troops by the federal government into Bayelsa State, the then Police Commissioner, Mr.

Hanum Eli, in a broadcast said that the military deployment into the interior is to protect oil installations. For whatever action taken by the security agencies were carried out in accordance with the principles of self-defence in the fact of provocation by the youth (Osadolor, 2001:26).

However, Ibaba (2001:21) countered that the Niger Delta region demands are limited to the provision of basic amenities such as roads, water, light, schools, and health centres which are lacking in these areas.

Multinational Oil Companies

Awoshakin (1998:17) explained that the Internet campaign by the Ogoni people in May 8, 1998 coincided with the Royal Shell Transport and Trading Groups Annual General Meeting which was housed in the Queen Elizabeth Conference Centre in London, England. According to Tokunbo (2004:19), the Ogoni people and their supporters called for an urgent investigation of Shell's records in Ogoniland and the troubled Niger Delta region as well as calling for the publication of the United Nations Special Rapporteur Report which, among others, blamed Shell for environmental degradation in the Niger Delta and collusion with the military in suppressing non-violent protests. The Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP) therefore called for an independent agency to determine all aspects of environmental damage due to oil exploration and other operations (Adigun, 2004:14).

As a spillover effect of the above state of affairs, the combined output of Chevron, Shell Petroleum Development and Nigerian Agip Oil Company was cut down by about 500,000 barrels of oil per day (bpd) in a new wave of community unrest launched by the Ijaw Egbesu youth/Boys of Africa (EBA). The group declared through their leader Mr. Alex Preye, that the government should construct, dualize roads linking all oil producing communities, create more council areas in Bayelsa State; establish a federal university and polytechnic in Bayelsa State; pay N20 million compensation; and provide pipe-borne water, electricity, cottage hospital and telecommunications network in all oil producing communities (Nagel, 2007:64).

Following the arrest of three Ijaw youth activists, the Ijaw youth under the aegis of the Egbesu Boys of Africa, claimed that five Chevron workers including the supervisor of the Abiteye flow station were taken hostage in retaliation for their arrested and detained youth activists (Okafor, 1998:3). Kinse Okoto, the Ijaw National Congress President responded that the "Nigerian state forgot that there are inhabitants in the places where they have been tapping these petroleum products from, and that their major source of livelihood had long been dislocated". Okoko noted further that they (IINC) intend to stop the mindless environmental degradation of the Ijaw nation occasioned by many

years of oil exploitation and production activities by the multinational oil companies, unfortunately without anything to show for it. If they had developed the indigenes and incorporated them, in their activities, there would not have arisen the problem of youths' restiveness today (Okoko, 2001:14). He attributed the cause to the faulty empowerment of a few community leaders by the oil companies (Shell, Agip, Elf, Mobil, etc), who set them against their people. He conclusively conceptualized it as the divide and rule method that has led to the explosive youth restiveness in the whole of the Niger-Delta region. Subject to the failure of the federal government and the prospecting oil companies to show concern to the demands of the youth congress, the restive Ijaw youths under the umbrella of All Ijaw Youth Conference (AIYC) gave oil workers and military persons protecting them (oil companies), an ultimatum to vacate Ijaw land. They even denounced the last transition programme for failing to provide for a restructuring of the country. Hence Obori (2002:16) observed that the ultimatum was given at a conference held in Kaiama – headquarters of Kolokola/Opokuma Council of Bayelsa State, to articulate a united solution to the alleged marginalization of Ijaw people. The youth decided that oil workers, contractors and military personnel are to withdraw from all 40 Ijaw clans, and henceforth the ownership

of all land and resources be reverted to the people without prejudice to any law that denies them that right. Their discontent was based on the non-democratic decrees that robbed the people and communities of the right to ownership and control of oil resources which were enacted without their participation and consent. These include: the Land Use Decree and the Petroleum Act. Following the position of the youth on resource control (Kaiama Declaration) on Tuesday, 12th September 2000, all activities in the Bayelsa State capital were grounded to a halt as everybody including market women and civil servants came out enmasse to give their support to the youth (Etim, 2000:6). They carried placards that read "On Kaiama declaration we stand", "Wake up all Ijaws for the control of your resources", "It is God-given", "Resource control and self-determination is our birth right". The rally leader Prof. Kimse Okoko addressing the Governor accompanied by the Minister of Labour and Productivity, expressed thus: "We want to tell this country that we will no longer accept environmental degradation that is taking place in Ijaw nation and if we continue to accept this position, our children and generations yet unborn will have no place in this country". Therein, in a statement the Ijaw Youths Congress (IYC) threatened to disrupt the oil companies' operations in the area code named, "Operation Climate Change". This would

continue indefinitely following the refusal of the transnational oil companies operating in the Ijaw land as contained in the Kaiama Declaration to cease operation in the Ijaw area pending the resolution of the issue of ownership and control within the Nigerian state (Obori, 2002:18). An official of the youth group expressed that the Kaiama Declaration does not amount to waging war against the state, but their right to self determination and resource control. He added that “the answer to the problem of the Niger Delta lies in convening a sovereign National Conference which shall be composed of equal representatives of the various ethnic nationalities in the Nigerian state (Obori, 2002:7). Bolaji, (2008:16) expressed that many observers point to the several years of deprivation and abject poverty in the face of abundance as the propelling force which has made groups in mineral rich areas to start the clamour for control of these resources.

Consequences of Oil Exploration

Another source of controversy is resource control in the Niger Delta areas and the revenue allocation formula. According to Enechukwu (2000:8), the federal government has been reported as saying that the 13 percent derivation payable to the oil mineral- producing states will equally be due to every state producing natural resources. This is a very serious policy statement because it touches on one of the most contentious issues in our hand at the

moment, and this is, the question of revenue allocation. He kicked against federal government’s idea to generalize the 13% derivation allocation. If the federal government claims to have concern for the Niger Delta region, the policy makers ought to understand that the level of the environmental hazard that attends the exploration of natural resources must, therefore, be factored in the determination of its place in the 13 percent derivation (Enechukwu, 2001:12). It is worthy of note that one of the nightmares of the oil producing communities in Nigeria is the environmental degradation that oil exploration has caused the Niger Delta area. Farmlands have been destroyed, and rivers have been polluted including many sources of drinking water and water for fishing. Therefore, Enechukwu concluded that this environmental problem has been the main source of confrontation between the oil producing communities and the government.

The former Delta State Finance Commissioner, David Edevbie, in a published statement noted that the Federal Government was unfairly exploiting the provisions of section 44, sub-section 4 of the 1999 Constitution, to deprive the state of their legitimate revenue. This section states that “...the entire property in the control of all minerals, mineral oil and natural gas in under or upon the territorial waters and the exclusive economic zone of Nigeria shall vest in the government

of the federation and shall be managed in such manner as may be prescribed by the National Assembly". Edevbie further explained that "Federal government has now presumably interpreted this provision to mean that revenue derivable from offshore production of oil cannot be credited to the state to which that offshore geographically belongs using the offshore Revenue (Regeneration of Grants) Act, 1971, Cap. 366 LFN, 1990 as a guide". He therefore summarized that "on the basis of the above interpretation, the federal government split oil revenue arbitrarily into 60 percent; 40 percent as onshore/offshore revenue and proceeded to base payment of the minimum 13 percent on the former (Dakolo, 2000:91). In effect, the federal government has merely paid 7.8 percent of oil revenue as derivation rather than the minimum of 13 percent enshrined in the Constitution (Dakolo, 2000:91).

Nahun alleged that the Kaiama Declaration demands a close down of oil production operations and the withdrawal of soldiers from Ijaw land and its environs pending the resolution of the issues of resources, ownership and control within the Nigerian state, without any intent of waging a war. He believes that through the convening of a sovereign National Conference, the answer to the problem of the Niger Delta will be treated (Nahun, 2001:17). Unfortunately, Odi and Ijaw south communities suffered a greater loss than the experience of Ogoni in

1993. on the attack of Odi community only in November 1999, Dipreye Almieyeseigha, Governor of Bayelsa State, who took a survey of the ruins of Odi lamented that "a total destruction of Odi as an expected oil producing community soon gain political autonomy in line with Ogoni and other oil-producing communities in the Niger Delta was unfortunate; Odi is finished... the sleepy Odi has been put to death". It was reported that after the attack, only 13 old women, about 2 old men and eight (8) children were left in Odi. He further observed that they looked dejected and hunger stricken as their houses had been pulled down by the soldiers (Umanah, 1999:25).

Ezea (1999:2) reported that in Port Harcourt, President Obasanjo and three Governors of core Niger Delta states reached an agreement on the body that will take responsibility for the development of the Niger Delta areas. Ezea reported also that President Olusegun Obasanjo announced at the end of the meeting held on the 11th June, 1999 that the meeting was his first official engagement outside the Federal Capital Territory Abuja since inauguration. He realized that there has been great injustice done to the people of the Niger Delta in the management of funds derived from petroleum and vowed to stop the rot. The President further posited that the petroleum in the Niger Delta being a cardinal issue of his electioneering campaign, he has commissioned consultants to fashion out a

comprehensive master plan for the development of the Niger Delta and that his worry is on how to agree on the immediate relief to quell the restiveness of the people who have expressed lack of faith in government promises. Also, Williams (1999:1) reported that President Obasanjo noted the grievances and sufferings of the Niger Delta people and acknowledged that in spite of being the goose that lays the golden eggs, the situation might have contributed partially to the crisis in the region.

Akporugo also observed that the communities have remained relentless in their question for a better deal on the principle of derivation, demanding that they should be entitled to at least some significant percent of all oil proceeds, since they consider it grossly unfair the practice where all revenues from the exploration of mineral resource in their environment always go to a pool that does not guarantee an equitable distribution. Expressing the fear that the clamour was in danger of degenerating into revolutionary actions by the people, Akporugo urged the government to mend its ways and stop "being unduly patronizing and too miserly in its community relations, while the oil companies should cease to be accomplices of the government in such unwholesome practices (Akporugo, 1998:20).

Conclusion

Don-Pedero (2006:14) a toxicologist

from the University of Lagos, suggested that in looking into the problems confronting the Niger Delta areas, the first step was the need for an act of parliament compelling all oil workers to live within 25 kilometers radius from their operational areas. He explained that such would force the oil companies to provide the necessary facilities and infrastructures; not only for their staff but also for the communities, which in the past bore the impact of the exploitation of their environment. Secondly, he suggested the abolition of Land Use Act of 1976 and Petroleum Act of 1979, which had been allegedly used to deprive the Niger Delta people of their resources, because they are obnoxious and unjust. In the same forum, the President of the Bayelsa Youth Federation (BYF), Mr. Andy Bekeobiri said that the only way there would be peace was the development of the human and material resources of the region with the full participation of the people (Bekeobiri, 1999:3).

With the constitution of the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) by the Federal Government to check the agitation for resource control, some activists including Chief Akunn explained that the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) is not the solution to their problem. According to him, the problem is beyond NDDC. Government is not sincere. He gave example that the 13 percent derivation to oil producing states is

just on paper. Obasanjo even argued that the amount of money the National Assembly approved for the oil companies to be paying the NDDC was too much. He asked: "Does Obasanjo sound like somebody who wants to change the situation in the Niger Delta on the

issue of the Niger Delta Development Commission solving the Niger Delta probes or complains?" (Ibaba, 2008:94) It is only hoped that with the amnesty programme in place, this problem of youth restiveness in the Niger Delta will be a thing of the past.

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