

Militarisation of Oil and Environmental Politics in Nigeria: Armed Resistance, State Responses and Peace Prospects in the Niger Delta Region

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Abstract: The contradictions inherent in interests of stakeholders in oil politics have escalated to armed confrontations in the oil-producing Niger Delta region of Nigeria. Years of unrealised development aspirations of the Niger Delta people and environmental crisis in relation to oil spillage and gas flaring have encouraged resistance against the oil industries and the state in the region. The manner of this resistance and state responses have undergone the process of militarisation in the last decades. The paper, which is qualitative in nature and thus drawing much from secondary data establishes that a series of political solutions, including support for zoning of Nigerian Presidency to the Niger Delta, and policy initiatives such as the amnesty programme for militants have helped to subdue the crisis. However, oil and environmental politics remains militarised for the state and resistant groups in the Niger Delta. Consequently, this article seeks to examine the nature and context of the socio-political crisis in the Niger Delta and the challenges and prospects for sustainable peace in the region.

Keywords: Amnesty, Armed Conflict, Niger Delta, Peace, Security

Introduction

The rise of Goodluck Jonathan as the first Nigerian Vice-President (2007-2010) and President (2010-2015) from Niger Delta is a political landmark in the region and Nigeria as a whole. Also, the introduction of Amnesty Programme (AP) for militants in the region by late President Umaru Yaradua in 2009 is significant to peacebuilding in the region. Although these factors delegitimised militancy and created relative peace in Niger Delta, it is not totally a holiday for pirates, kidnappers and the disaffected (ex-) militants. However, the peace process became disrupted at an alarming rate between 2015 and 2016 when the Niger Delta Avengers (NDA) among other groups renewed militancy in the region. The groups like their predecessors hanged their grievances on unrealised development aspirations of the people of oil producing Niger Delta region, which is connected to the aggressive quest to maximise profit at minimum cost to oil corporations, and the centralisation, corruption and militarisation measure of the oil-dependent Nigerian federation at the detriment of the region.

Regardless of recent development, ecological crisis born out of the activities of Oil Corporations, economic underdevelopment and political marginalisation of the Niger Delta people in Nigeria continue to be major sources of grievances in the region. Though the region's history is not without violence or aggressive advocacy, the oil producing communities have peacefully protested their political marginalisation and ecological vulnerability until the socio-political and environmental conditions developed more frostily and state

responses also become actively militarised. These largely encouraged the emergence of radical movements seeking to challenge the oil beneficiaries namely, oil corporations, state and federal governments and some members of the political class. Despite a series of political and policy initiatives however, crisis has remained an enduring subject in oil and environmental politics in the Niger Delta. Against this background, the article seeks to examine nature and the context of the crisis, and the prospects for peace, in the Niger Delta region.

Oil and Environmental Politics in the Niger Delta

Oil prospecting in Nigeria dates back to 1908 when a German firm established a bitumen company to undertake exploration for bitumen in the coastal area between Lagos and Okitipupa (Oketa and Tobi, 2001:155). Before the colonial windup, oil was discovered in Oloibiri community in 1956 by Shell D'Arcy, a company that received a sole concession to operate in Nigeria in 1937. Production in commercial quantity commenced in 1958. The country's production capacity rose from initial 5100 barrels per day (bpd) in 1958 to 900,000 bpd in 1970 and now 2.7 million bpd in 2017 (NNPC, 1999; 2017). The discovery of oil in Niger Delta was celebrated in the region, in the hope that oil increases their ability to influence the central government to better their condition. This is important for a region that is dominantly populated by several ethnic minority groups, who are contending with 'majoritarian dictatorship' of Hausa/Fulani, Igbo and Yoruba in the federation.

Oil accounts for about 40% of Nigerian Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and

70% of government revenues. The aggressive global oil quest that follows the 1970s oil shock is a landmark in Nigerian political economy history. Skyrocketing oil price in 1970s brought post-civil war Nigerian military elites, led by General Yakubu Gowon, in contact with petrol-dollars, which has continued to dictate the breath of Nigerian government and politics till date. In an attempt to consolidate the oil field for gushing transnational investors, the Mineral Act of 1914 was replaced with Petroleum Act of 1969. For effective control of the natural resources, most especially the fossil fuel, government introduced the Land Use Decree in 1978, apportioning all landed property to the state governments on behalf of the federal government.

In an attempt to create favourable condition for the investors, little attention has been paid to the condition of the oil producing communities. The implications of Land Use Act in Niger Delta is that the federal government collect rent fees, while the state government received compensation on lands use by oil corporations, hence, individuals and their oil rich communities are alienated. The crisis busted when government's claim to ownership of land began to flood the feudal system that premised the region's subsistence culture. The local communities were made to understand that the resources: air, land, and water that link them with their ancestors are no more under their jurisdiction. Though similar claims to ownership of land dated back to colonial era, but such claims remain largely abstract, for it has not really displaced the traditional land lords system in the region.

In addition to land alienation, Niger Delta was further ecologically threatened by the activities of the oil corporation that causes excessive oil spillage in host communities. Between 2000 and 2015, Nigeria reportedly produced 33,136,101,351 million standard cubic feet (mscf) of natural gas, amidst which 31 per cent or 10,290,099,374 mscf were flared. At the same time, 2.4 billion metric tons of oil was lost mostly spilled in the Niger Delta (NNPC, 2000-2015). The implications of both oil spillage and gas flaring ranges from displacement of job to violent clashes for the control of little created by surplus available resources. Omotola (2006:10) pointed out that "for one thing, due to incessant oil spillages, the people have been deprived of their main sources of livelihood, that is fishing and farming. This is because oil spills have inflicted unimaginable levels of damage on farmlands and rivers such that they can no longer sustain soil nutrients and aquatic resources". Aghalino (2011:177) further acknowledge that "the health of the environment and the lives of the people are intertwined with the health of the water system. The food, water and cultural identity of many local people are closely related to the delta ecosystem". Also, the relationship between reduction in tradition opportunities (farming and fishing), without another, can be a better stepping stone to understand competition for scarce resources that has been created by abundance in the region.

The implications of environmental degradations extend to declining health condition in some of the communities. Chronic cough, catarrh, stooling, headache, miscarriage, cholera and

many other form of sickness have been reported. Beyond physical deprivation or displacement, the impact of oil spillage extends to spiritual life of these communities. For example, the Ogoni environment which once teemed with wildlife, was the food basket of the region and the abode of Ogoni spirits and deities, has been reduced to a wasteland by an ecological war waged by Shell (Agbonifo, 2011:254). The natural environment that conserves community's ancestral spirits is said to have been affected by the denaturalisation of the environment and vulnerability of their descendants.

The politics of oil spillage propel numerous demands from compensation to autonomy by various oil producing communities. These demands informed a blame game between government and oil companies. Not until the emergence of Ken Saro-Wiwa and his Ogoni-led uprising, government continued to wallow in an enclosed belief that the activities of the corporation causes oil spillage and they should be responsible to the communities whose environment are damaged with limited state regulation to that effect. Equally, Ukeje (2001:342) observed that Niger Delta 'also witnessed an acute neglect by the oil companies, who argue that it is beyond their corporate callings to play the role of an alternative government and provide social amenities and infrastructure to their host communities. It is believed by the corporations that finance of any infrastructure facility should go hand in hand with target goal of maximising profit not community service". Hence, development was not given adequate attention by concern stakeholders in the Niger Delta perhaps until recently.

As part of the efforts to deny responsibility for environmental degradation and ignore the required interventions, government and the oil companies have considerably embarked on aggressive and expensive propaganda against the claims of the host communities. Because of this information deficit, we are out of touch with reality and are also standing on a dangerous shelf of oil-dependent, corporate-induced information starvation (Hoffmann, 1999:105). Aghalino (2009:285) pointed out that "there is of course the warped declaration that oil pollution does not degrade the environment to the extent popularly imagined. Before now, spill studies conducted by oil companies, or their consultants, attempt to minimize, or at best deny, the environmental and socio-cultural impact of oil pollution". Specifically, Shell International reportedly launched a £20 million corporate communication campaign in March 1999 in order to boost the company's tarnished reputation following several public relations disasters. Equally, after Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight other Ogoni leaders were hanged, the government was reported to have paid some foreign media to counter-information on its inhuman act that received international criticism (Omotola, 2006).

For regime survival amidst Nigeria's patrimonial politics, government have embarked on some development spearheaded policies in the region. One of the government policy responses include state creation and derivation (Amuwo, et al, 1998). Niger Delta is now made up of 9 of the 36 states in the federation, compared to 1960 when it was peripheral of both Eastern and Western regions. The revenue

collectable by oil producing states for derivation was also raised from 1 per cent in 1970s to 13 per cent since late 1990s, although it is below 50 per cent as obtainable in the early 1960s. Various institutions were also created to manage oil and environmental politics in the region. The Niger Delta Development Board (NDDB) was established in 1961, Oil Mineral Producing Area Development Commission (OPADEC) in 1992, Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) in 2000 and National Oil Spill Detection and Response Agency (NOSDRA) among others. For all these efforts, however, there are concerns whether the government is only doing this to ensure peace and security for the benefit of the oil sector, or is it genuinely interested in human development in the region without oil-motivation (Usodike and Isike, 2009)

Oil corporations in Niger Delta also embarked on corporate social responsibility to reduce its own blame in the oil politics. At the core of the corporate social responsibility is the recognition that profitability and social improvement go hand in hand (Eberly, 2008:49). Barnes (2005:12) pointed out that “of the five Shell companies operating in Nigeria, four have community development offices. One devotes \$60 million a year, or 3 percent, of its in-country operating budget, to community development”. In most cases, oil corporations construct roads, schools and clinics and provides scholarship, employment opportunities, drugs, electricity and portable water in many host communities in the Niger Delta. Despite these efforts, however, political corruption undermines the prospect planned actions. The alliance between national elites and local elites

for self-satisfaction conspire against the development of the region. While local elites embezzled the funds allocated from the federation account into the region, the national elites have decided to keep their eye blind to this, in order to retain some of their supporters. Oil Corporations also bribe state officials to overlook or downplay the misdeeds in their activities. In this manner, there are allegation that local elites and relatives are largest beneficiaries of some of the so called corporate social responsibility.

Militarisation of Resistance and State Response

The grievances of the Niger Delta people over oil and environmental politics in Nigeria assumed a phase of both civil and militant mobilisations against the state and oil corporation in the last three decades. However, the history of anti-state mobilisation in the Niger Delta can be traced back to the pre-colonial era, when Jaja and Nana consciously defended their economic interests against British Imperial state. The declaration of Niger Delta Republic by Isaac Boro and 150 volunteer forces on February 22, 1966 in Tantonabau, which latter turned to 12 days revolution, is historically significant in the region's political advocacy. The rise of Ken Saro-Wiwa marked a turning point in the history of advocacy in the region, as it concretised the politics of oil spillage and attract the attention and partnership of environmentalists and human right advocates nationally and globally. Mass unemployment, poverty, land alienation for peasant population and displacement of aquatic employees, raised grievances against the state and oil corporations. Timid and inadequate state responses in implementing environmental and minority friendly policy, and the whole complexity

surrounding distribution of oil wealth further popularised the anti-state mobilisation in the region.

Though Nigerian government has always employed 'carrot and stick' response to advocacies in Niger Delta, blood spillage characterised its record of crisis management in the region. Starting with civil advocacies, the cost of production disruption and its effect on state revenue, propelled government to deploy and maintain combat ready military and police to defend its interests shared with oil corporation and non-oil producing states in the Niger Delta. Aghalino (2006:311) observed therefore that "while it may be cynical, for oil, Nigerian government is prepared to submerge the Niger Delta in blood. In a way it may be fair to stress that the shedding of blood has been part of Nigerian government's oil policy."

Ibeanu and Momoh (2008:14) also pointed out that "the Nigerian state is itself a source of insecurity. State security agencies constitute a veritable threat to the security of the citizens of Nigeria. More often, rather than restore peace and order, they exacerbate crises, ramping up social and political tensions". Besides, there are many counter-advocacies that introduced confusion and animosity, with direct or indirect involvement of actions or inaction of the state, which inspired a series of communal and ethnic conflicts in the Niger Delta.

The Nigerian state has deployed security forces, which have records of campaigns of terror against the people of the Niger Delta, through a series of operations of various military task forces, Rivers state Task Force and the Joint Task Force that is complimented by the activities of mobile police known as 'kill and go', State Security Service

(SSS), and the Directorate of Military Intelligence (DMI) (Aborisade, 2010:77; Osaghae, 2008:202). State campaigns of terror are evident in Egbema (1989-91), Oburu (1989), Umuchem (1990), Bonny (1992), Egi-Obaji (1994), Tai-Biara (Ogoni) (1994), Ubima (1995), Odi (1999) (Chukuezi, 2009:101). During the Ken Saro-Wiwale Ogoni uprising, his people were assaulted by the military and police (either regular or camouflaged as neighbouring militias). At the same time, government is believed to have instigated Andonis and Okirikas against the Ogoni people in 1993. In this process, more than 1,000 people lost their lives and 30,000 people rendered homeless (Omotola, 2009: 139). In response to the killing of twelve policemen by Egbesu Boys of Africa in Odi, Bayelsa State, in November 1999, President Olusegun Obasanjo deployed troop into the village. This operation reportedly emptied the village and left about 2000 villagers dead, while 50,000 people were displaced. Gbaramatu Kingdom in Delta State is another hotspot of state terror in Niger Delta the turn of the 21st century (Tamuno, 2011).

The Niger Delta conflict began as genocide but later became a war. At the initial stage, government is believed to assault helpless citizens that raised their interests in the oil politics; this led to the rise of radical armed groups against the state, its security forces and the oil interests that they are defending in the region. As a witness and victim of the genocide era, Ken Saro-Wiwa predicted the "war in the delta" (Maier, 2000:110). Collier (2010:103) observed that "guns became necessary if your opponents have them". The presence and activities of the military in the

region radicalised civil society groups in the region. The security forces reign like imperial king in this region; their activities include extra judicial killing, assassination, and disguised invasion of hostile villages inform of inter-community warfare (Aborisade, 2005; Joab-Peterside, 2005; Tamuno, 2011). The security support received by the corporations from the state, popularised the belief that government value oil more than human security in the Niger Delta. It is thus paradoxical that rather than guarantee social and economic security, oil became a source of insecurity to the aborigines, and rather than a guarantor of human security in the delta, the state has become its major violator (Sampson, 2009:31). Hence, state (military) and corporate (ecological) terror inspired the militarisation of Niger Delta youths.

The militarisation of state responses to civil advocacies in the Niger Delta militarised some of the advocacy groups and their strategies in the region. In a bid to improve security against the state, some of them energised community spirit for militant mobilisation. Different armed groups thus emerged to coherently platform sporadic uprising into organised militancy. Amidst this, there were the Egbesu Boys of Africa (EBA), the Niger Delta Peoples Volunteers Force (NDPVF), the Niger Delta Vigilant (NDV), the Movement for the Emancipation of Niger Delta (MEND), the Niger Delta People's Salvation Front (NDPSF), the Coalition of Militant Action (COMA), the Bayelsa Volunteers, the Niger Delta Resistance Movement, and the Niger Delta Militant Force Squad (NDMFS). Some of the groups started as a political machinery, and subsequently developed

into militant platform for societal grievance (Tamuno, 2011). Some also started as a pirate groups, cult and other forms of criminal gangs (Ukiwo, 2007). Raging communal and ethnic conflicts in the region in the turn of 21 century also encouraged youths to pick up arms. Equally, factionalism and fractured movement also led to proliferation of militant groups in the Niger Delta.

The Niger Delta crisis is attended by kidnapping, sabotage, maritime piracy, insurgency, and opens confrontations with state force by militants. Annually, hundreds of people fall victim of kidnapping by militants, pirates and opportunists for ransom, which can range from N500,000 to N1 billion (Oyewole, 2016a). Grievous youths constantly vent their anger on the oil corporations with attacks against their installations to the detriment of production activities. Oil and gas supply is obstructed through vandalisation of pipelines, oil theft and illegal refineries. Shipment of oil and gas and other commodities in the Niger Delta, Nigeria's territorial waters and the Gulf of Guinea and their supply in the global market is threatened by frequent attacks, kidnappings, hijackings and theft by pirates and armed robbers (Oyewole, 2016b). More alarming, state security forces are also targeted for attacks to undermine perceived government-corporation hard-line. The implications of this hotness is felt through reduction in oil production by corporation, tax paid to the federal government and insecurity in the region and beyond. Hence, a significant percentage of the oil rent received by the state goes to defence, for procurement of military hardware to defend oil workers and installations.

Over the years, the widespread civil resistance in the Niger Delta has degenerated into lawlessness and disorder that criminalised many youths. Militancy has turned into a profitable business upon which warlord gained surplus values and from where unemployed youth secured a comfortable monetised living. Decent work does not pay well enough when kidnapping is likely to net a cash haul equivalent to a government employee's entire career earnings (Offiong and Cocodia, 2011:173; Oyewole, 2016a). Hence, Niger Delta militants cannot be denied of criminality and lust for plunder, despite their ideological motivation. Though most of these militant groups have incentives that are beyond grievances that were formerly recognised, they undoubtedly make the region hot for oil corporations and Nigerian government in retaliation for perceived environmental injustice. As militarised state response generates terror in the efforts to undermine environmental terror, the Niger Delta experiences turned out to be "less oil, more blood and more fire" (Ibeanu, 2000:19).

Peace by Peaceful Means and its Challenges

The prevailing insecurity that was witnessed in the Niger Delta since the turn of 21st century has raised the course of the region to the top of national security agenda in Nigeria. Beyond the military and policing responses of the state, a series of conflict management strategies have been explored also in the Niger Delta. Prominent among these are dialogues, political concessions, developmental policy and institutional building. Amidst these, the emergence of Dr. Goodluck Jonathan as the first

indigene of Niger Delta to become Nigerian Vice President (2007-2010) and President (2010-2015) is a significant concession for peace process in the region. Equally, President Yar'Adua (2007-2010) accorded priority to Niger Delta issues, recognised the limitation of military solution, and initiated peace dialogue in 2008. In 2009, the federal government succeeded in negotiating with the militants and other stakeholders in the Niger Delta. In this process, Amnesty was granted to 20,192 militants, of which 15,000 of them surrendered 2,760 assorted guns, 287,445 rounds of different calibre ammunition, 18 gunboats, 763 dynamite sticks, 1,090 dynamite caps, and 3,155 magazines, to receive state pardon (Maiangwa and Agbiboa, 2013:74; Obi and Rustad, 2011:204).

The Amnesty programme entails a robust disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR). Militants were paid for arms and ammunitions surrendered, as an incentive to embrace amnesty and address proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALW). Amidst these, the military in collaboration with repentant militants identified and destroyed several militant camps across the creeks of the Niger Delta (Tamuno, 2011). The former combatants who registered for the 42-month period of training, reintegration and rehabilitation in government-designated residential training centers received a monthly allowance of NGN 65,000 (USD 410) over the same period (Maiangwa and Agbiboa, 2013:74). Ex-militants were also sponsored for studies locally and internationally, and encouraged/assisted to set up legitimate business. Amidst these, security contracts to protect oil installations

were given to ex-militant leaders. The Nigerian Maritime Administration and Safety Agency (NIMASA) awarded a pipeline surveillance contract worth \$103.4million (about N15 billion) to Tompolo's company—Global West Vessel Specialist Limited (GWVSL) in 2011. Asari Dokubo, Dagogo, Egberi Papa, got N2 billion contract to also secure the oil pipelines in Bayelsa and Rivers States, while N580 million contract was awarded to Boyloaf's company (This Day, 2013).

The Amnesty programme has received mixed reception among the militants and reactions in the public. Although Amnesty relatively delegalize militancy in the Niger Delta, some militants also rejected it. The post-amnesty campaigns of John Togo, one of MEND commander, and his Niger Delta Liberation Force (NDLF) is a prominent case. This also explain the bombing of a political rally in Bayelsa on 29th December 2010 and 1 October 2010 that almost marred the Nigeria's 50th Independence anniversary celebrations. Equally, the attractive incentives that are attached to DDR encouraged some of the youths that were initially peaceful before the amnesty to embrace violence. This is evident with the emergence of Urhobo Revolutionary Army (URA) in 2011 and Liberation Movement of the Urhobo People (LIMUP) in 2013. Competition for security contracts among militant leaders also led to proliferation of agitation movements like Coalition of Urhobo Ex-Militant Agitators (CUEA), Coalition of Urhobo/Isoko Ex-Militant Leaders and the Urhobo Gbagbako and associated violence (Oyewole, 2018). Though Nigeria was able to raise its annual production capacity for crude oil from

2008 to 2010, it started to decline again from 2011; while growth in gas produced was consistently followed by decline in the immediate year (NNPC, 2015).

More alarming, the multi-billion dollars amnesty and Jonathan Presidency achieved little success in mitigating the record of criminal violence, such sabotage or oil bunkering, illegal oil refining and kidnapping and armed robbery in waterways and piracy in Nigeria's coasts and the Gulf of Guinea (GoG). At least, 14,986 incidences of sabotage against pipeline were recorded in Nigeria between 2011 and 2015 (NNPC, 2015). Although pirate attacks decline in Nigeria from 40 in 2008 to about 10 in 2011, Nigerian-based pirate groups expanded their operations to the neighbouring countries and the GoG. Benin with no record of pirate attacks in 2010 recorded 20 attacks in 2011 and Togo also recorded 28 between 2011 and 2013 (Oyewole, 2015). Several illegal refineries also emerged across the creeks, and together with vandalism, they added to the environmental crisis and mostly responsible for a series of fire disasters in the Niger Delta region (Onuoha, 2009; NNPC, 2015). Kidnapping for ransom by faceless groups is also undeterred (Oyewole, 2016a).

Although there is a decline in popularity of militant advocacy in the Niger Delta, the root causes of the crisis in the region is yet to be fully resolved despite some progress report in some fronts. There are enduring demand for increase in allocation and transparency with oil revenue, economic development, poverty reduction, job opportunities, and sustainable environment in the region. While the gas flaring is on decrease, the oil

spillage has increased. Oil product loss through rupture and attacks against pipelines rose from 110,380 metric tons in 2009 to 482,810 metric tons in 2015, while gas flared has reduced from 35.42 per cent to 11.65 per cent of total production, which is between 2.1 and 3 trillion mscf (NNPC, 2015). Notably, when Shell spilled 40, 000 barrels of oil in Bongain 26th December 2011, and was fined \$5billion by National Oil Spill Detection and Response Agency (NOSDRA), media war and deceit politics was used to downplay the claimed effects of the spill (Amaize, 2012;Umukoro, 2012). In 2015, however, Shell agreed to pay the residents of the Bodo community in the Niger Delta US\$84million (£55m) settlement for two oil spills in 2008 and 2009. Hence, 15,600 affected fishermen reportedly received \$3,300 each for losses caused by the spills and the remaining \$30m was used for community project (BBC, 2015).

The Niger Delta peace process also confronted a series of political challenges at the federal level. At the initial stage of Boko Haram crisis, many northern politicians equate the group with MEND. President Jonathan was criticised for political fatigue in criminalising the 2010 Independent Day bombing by MEND. Prior to 2013/2014, therefore, many from the North advocated for amnesty for Boko Haram, creation of Federal Ministry of Northern Affairs, elimination of derivation share of revenue to oil producing Niger-Delta to increase allocation to less developed north, among others (Oyewole, 2013). Some even criticised the idea of sending ex-militants for training abroad in strategic fields, which can be explored in confrontation against the federation in

future. ThesethreatenedJonathan Presidency, one of the bases of a peaceful Niger Delta. In 2012, AsariDokubo, the founder of NDPVF, “warned that any attempt to remove Jonathan from power forcefully could lead to civil war...It is because of Goodluck Jonathan that we kept quiet. But soon, we will not be able to guarantee our patience any more” (Agbo, 2012:52-53). More ex-militant leaders directly or indirectly declared their support for Jonathan towards the 2015 Presidential election, and raised public fear that the defeat of the Niger Delta indigene in pull will not be taken lightly in the region.

Beyond Jonathan and Amnesty: Challenges and Prospects for Peace

Though Jonathan received more than 90 per cent of the votes in the south-south and south-east, he turn out to be the first President of Nigeria to loss power to an opposition party/candidate through pull. Yet,he was widely commended for dousing tension down and ensuring peaceful transfer of powerto opposition party (Adeniyi, 2017). However, the President MuhammaduBuhari relatively tough stand or appearance against corruption threatened the beneficiaries of state patronage under the Jonathan Presidency in the Niger Delta and beyond. In view of records of allegations of missing funds under Jonathan and contrasting economy, Buhari initiated many probes in the early stage of his administration. Many indicting reports were released about the past administration, and some high-ranking officials were arrested, detained and/or their assets forfeited to government. The new administration also declared its intention not to extend amnesty programme beyond 2015, when it supposed to wide up, and also

launched probe of security contracts awarded to ex-militants. In this manner, Tompolo was declared wanted by the anti-corruption agency. Also, state patronage of ex-militants reduced with the cut of Amnesty budget from N63 billion in 2015 to N20 billion in 2016 (Umoru and Erunke, 2016).

Against this background, several individuals and groups started to emerge and gain popularity in the Niger Delta for their critical opinions and advocacies against what they brand as witch-hunting and sectionalism of the new government. More alarming, the relatively tough disposition of the administration against subversion became noticeable in the militarised war to protect oil facilities in the region. Nevertheless, Nigeria recorded increase in attacks against oil installations, thefts of oil product and proliferations of illegal refineries in the region in 2015/2016. Amidst this, the Niger Delta Avengers (NDA) announced its existence in February 2016 and set the stage for a wave of militancy in the region (Onuoha, 2016). Other militant groups that emerged between February and August 2016 include the Reformed Egbesu Boys of the Niger Delta (REBND), the AdakaBoro Avengers (ABV), the Joint Niger Delta Liberation Force (JNDLF), the Niger Delta Revolutionary Crusaders (NDRC), the Niger Delta Greenland Justice Mandate (NDGJM), the Asawana Deadly Force of Niger Delta (ADFNG) and the Niger Delta Development Movement (NDDM).

The militant movements declared a series of operations codenamed "Operation Red Economy", "Operation Zero Oil" and "Operation Crocodile Tears". These were accompanied by a series of attacks/bombing of oil and gas

pipelines across the region. The militant campaign further worsened the ecological challenges in the region: the bombing of pipelines resulted into oil spills, gas flaring and wildfire, which had negative effects on the environment and the health and means of livelihood of many people in the affected communities. The reduction in oil and gas production/supply as a result of the militants activities and the decline in oil price in the global market, affected the budget of the state governments in the region, to the detriment of their capacity to produce public goods. The federal government lost N20 billion revenue monthly, which is connected to the 2,560 cases of vandalism recorded, in 2016. Due to attacks against gas supply lines, the electricity supplied by the gas power plants also dropped from 3,004MW in December 2015 to 1,715MW in December 2016 (Oyewole, 2018). Also early in 2016, Angola displaced Nigeria as the foremost oil producing country in the continent. Maritime security in the coast of Nigeria, its neighbours and the Gulf of Guinea was also affected by the resurgence of Niger Delta militancy. Pirate attacks and armed robbery against ships in Nigeria's waters rose from 14 in 2015 to 36 cases in 2016 (IMB, 2017).

Against this background, the federal government raised the level of military presence and security engagements in the region. "Operation Delta Safe" was announced by the Joint Task Force (JTF) in June 2016, while "Operation Crocodile Smile" was launched against militancy by the Nigerian Army in August 2016. A coordinated land, sea and air campaign was launched against militants, pirates and illegal refineries. This led to a series of arrests and

intensified search and destroy of camps occupied by armed groups. Hundreds of illegal oil refineries were destroyed in this process. However, this did not bring the militant attacks or sabotage to an end. Besides, many advocacy groups emerged with a demand and campaign for government to employ dialogue to resolve the security challenges. The rising cost of militant attacks also put pressure on the hawk in government to tone down military engagements at a middle of 2016, in order to give political solution a chance.

Starting from July 2016, government entered into a series of dialogues with stakeholders in the Niger Delta. The Vice-President, Prof. Yemi Osinbajo also visited all the Niger Delta states and some of oil producing communities, and conducted a series of stakeholders meeting in this process. Amidst these, the pan-Niger Delta group, led by Edwin Clark, call on all the militant groups in the region to cease hostilities and give further dialogue a chance. Between August and September 2016, the group succeeded in persuading all the known militant groups in the region (Oyewole, 2018). Further dialogues have carried on root causes of the regional crisis. The 2015/2016 wave of militancy like its predecessors is mainly anchored on unrealised development aspirations of the Niger Delta people, despite the fast resources that are available in the region for the purpose. This is further complicated by grievances on the environmental challenges in the region. Amidst these, there are widespread political corruption, poverty and inequality and youth unemployment. All these issues were raised in dialogues with the federal government, and factored into the subsequent Niger

Delta development plan in 2017, of which its implementation is another subject of concern.

Prominent among the federal government project in the Niger Delta since 2015 involves rail and road construction and rehabilitation. Modular refinery policy introduced in early 2017 by Acting President Osinbajo to create job opportunities and replace illegal refineries was widely applauded. This will help to create environmentally friendly small scale refineries with safety precaution. At the same time, the attempt to relocate the headquarters of Multinational Oil Companies to the Niger Delta was also popular in the region, even though this was challenged by affected companies and it failed. Though government has committed efforts to clean up oil spill-affected environment in the Niger Delta since 2015, the popular Ogoni clean-up has suffered more delay than expected. Despite some initiatives that raised hope recently, the menace of corruption, poverty, inequality, youth unemployment and environmental degradation remain major challenges to the people of oil rich Niger Delta. Equally, different forms of criminal violence and the militarised state responses in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria has remained a subject of national and human security debates.

Conclusion

This article explored the evolution and recent dynamics in oil and environmental politics, as well as its prospect for peace and conflict in the Niger Delta region. Years of unrealised development aspirations of the Niger Delta people, and environmental crisis in relation to oil spillage and gas flaring have encouraged resistance against the oil industries and the state in the region.

The manner of this resistance and state responses have undergone the process of militarisation in last decades. Amidst these, a series of political solutions, including support for zoning of Nigerian Presidency to the Niger Delta, and policy initiatives like amnesty programme for militants considerably tame some of the crises. However, armed and criminal resistances and militarised state responses remain enduring in the Niger Delta. The level of political corruption, poverty, inequality, unemployment and irresponsibility in environmental management in the oil producing region have continued to encourage anti-state resistances through political and criminal means. More alarming, the crisis endured amidst a series of military campaigns and the attending human rights abuses in the region.

Against this background, there is a need for the federal government to commit sustainable efforts to enhance human development and security. It is imperative to invest in infrastructural facilities and human capacity building, and encourage local initiatives and small scale businesses to reduce youth unemployment in the region. Policy on

modular refineries deserve sustained commitments in this consideration. Institutional capacity to track and manage environmental crisis effectively need to be improved. The legislature need to increase its oversight on the Niger Delta question as it involves development, environmental and security aspiration of the people of the region. The court should be made more attractive to seek redress for land and environmental injustice. The security forces need to maintain adequate presence to guarantee security of lives and properties, and their engagements should involve minimum force and highest respect for the fundamental human rights of all the citizens in their areas of responsibility (AOR). The security forces also need to be well integrated into disaster management strategy in the region. More inclusive decision-making and implementation process will encourage understanding among stakeholders, and more transparent distribution and utility of oil wealth will promote public confidence. These will address some of the root causes of the crisis and increase the prospects of sustainable peace in the region.

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