

Proliferation of Small Arms and Conflict in the Nigeria's Niger Delta Region

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Abstract

One of the biggest security challenges facing Nigeria today is the proliferation of small arms and light weapons. This development whose explosion started in the Niger Delta in the early 1990s has escalated to engulf the whole nation. It now calls for serious attention from state governments, national and even regional organizations. The trade in small arms and light weapons in Nigeria has fuelled ethnic clashes in the Niger Delta, especially between the Ijaws and their immediate neighbors, the Itsekiri and Urhobos as events have shown. This situation aggravates the security problems in the Niger Delta already engendered by the activities of oil Transnationals operating 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 been intensified through the use of weapons that are primarily smuggled from some African countries such as Guinea-Bissau, Gabon and Cameroon. The paper concludes by making some suggestions as policy options for the resolution of the armed conflict in the Nigeria's Niger Delta, with specific reference to the problems of arms proliferation.

Keywords: Conflicts, Niger Delta, Proliferation, Small Arms, Transnationals.

Introduction

The proliferation of small arms and light weapons in the West African sub-region in the 1990s and Nigeria's Niger Delta in particular with its destabilizing effect in hotspots of the region have drawn the attention of both state and non-state actors. These governmental and non-governmental actors have come to terms with the urgent need to find means, measures or mechanisms to halt this dangerous trend within the region. In Nigeria Niger Delta for instance, the oil community's environment has been badly polluted by the activities of Transnational Oil Companies (TNCs) led by Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC) of Nigeria. Their environment has been so negatively polluted that the political, economic and social life of the people have almost been destroyed, forcing many people living in the region to abandon their homes and occupations in search of new homes and means of livelihood; hence the agitation for clean environment and resource control and the consequent insecurity challenges in the region as a result of the attempts by the indigenes of the region to save their environment from pollution and control the oil resources located within their land.

Unfortunately, the Federal Government of Nigeria by centralizing the ownership and control of oil resource further undermined the interest of the region. Hence, issues like marginalization, social inequality and deprivation became rife in the Niger Delta where the politics of Oil played a significant role. Subsequently the federal government lost billions of dollars in oil revenue through the activities of militia groups agitating for clean environment (Ikelegbe, 2001). The militia groups as a result became increasingly restive and inclined to engage in anti-state and anti-social activities (Ikelegbe, 2001). Their actions resulted in the militarization of the region by the Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN) in attempt to curb their activities, while the militia groups transformed from fighting a just cause against environmental pollution to criminal activities bordering on illegal bunkering of crude oil, kidnapping and hostage taking of expatriates and local oil workers.

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. Tempo increased further with the blowing up of oil wells and destruction of other oil installations, disruption of socio-economic activities and unparalleled violence that degenerated into a state of militancy; thereby causing further political instability and insecurity in the region. By 1998, "the Niger Delta region had become a lawless zone", as summed up by NDDC (2004). Contrary to public expectations, the oil wealth in the Niger Delta Region has not transformed the region positively. Rather, the Niger Delta oil communities are bearing the burden of environmental pollution, with the consequent health hazards and economic impoverishment, hence the violent struggle by the oil communities to be free from Oil TNCs, especially SPDC's exploitations and Federal government's failure to regulate Oil TNCs like Shell.

With the increased number of internal crises or conflicts, Oil TNCs resorted to private arrangement to secure their oil installations, including hiring some of these militias, thus increasing the arms race among the militias and distinct communities with the consequent proliferation of arms in the region. Such 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 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 had consequently and always challenged the state and foreign oil multinational policies and attitudes since the early 1990s. The Ijaw ethnic group, in particular, appeared the most violent, aggressive and warlike given how it has engaged other major ethnic groups and oil multinationals in the Niger Delta. This has given rise to the militarization of the region by both sides to the conflict, the federal government/oil multi-nationals and the people, a recipe for and a result of arms proliferation with the State security forces and (ethnic) militias procuring weapons in bids

to neutralize each other. MNOCs have been indicted for their role in the militarization of the Niger Delta through their procurement of weapons for state security forces as well as for their private security outfits, like Shell Police.

With the end of the Cold War, armies in both the Eastern and Western blocs reduced their size, and their governments gave or sold excess equipment to friends and allies. For instance, since 1995, the United States alone was quoted to have given away more than 3 million rifles, pistols, machine guns, and grenade launchers (*Awake* 2001:6). This illegal trade in small weapons was and is still carried out in black markets where they are purchased by rebel groups, paramilitary groups and local militias, sometimes without money, but in exchange with minerals such as gold, diamonds and other strategic minerals seized from their mines. Hence the difficulty in making a distinction between what is legal and illegal sales of weapons. 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 such sophisticated guns is very disturbing as experienced in the Niger Delta armed resistance.

Oil Wealth and the Nature of Niger Delta Conflict

The Niger Delta Region itself was the British Oil Rivers Protectorate from 1885 until 1893, when it was expanded and renamed the Niger Coast Protectorate, and has been experiencing violence and uprising till date. During the colonial period, the core Niger Delta was a part of the Eastern Region of Nigeria, which came into being in 1951 (being one of the three regions that ushered in Nigeria's independence in 1960). This region according to Okonta and Douglas (1999), included the people from colonial Calabar and Ogoja divisions, which are the present Ogoja, Annang, Ibibio, Oron, the Efik people, the Ijaw, and finally the Igbo. The National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC) was the ruling political party in the region during this period. It later changed its name to National Convention of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC), after the Western Cameroon decided to separate from Nigeria.

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 that by 1958, Nigeria became an oil exporter with a production level of about 6 000 barrels per day, with other MNOCs like Mobil, Elf Aquitaine, Chevron and Agip joining Shell in mining activities in the region (Ibeanu 2000:21). By 1970s however, production reached a peak of two million barrels per day (Ibeanu 2000:21) Presently, Nigeria is the fifth largest producer of crude oil in the organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC).

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 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). 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 agriculture was supreme, while 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.

The unique nature of the Nigeria's Delta region insecurity is very worrisome as the region produces the bulk of Nigeria's oil wealth which accounts for over eighty per cent of Nigeria's oil reserves or deposits. Despite Shell's social services programme (which is largely palliative), oil exploration activities in the region has continued to impact negatively on the environment. As a result, the insecurity challenges in the region remain unresolved. 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 Egborode (Ola & Eighemheberio 1998),³ and Jesse oil explosion that killed nearly 1000 people (The Guardian 2000a:15) 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 vandalization of the pipelines by the local communities, their sole aim being to steal petroleum products. The oil multinationals used the same argument to shy away from their responsibilities of paying compensations for the environmental pollutions. 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, marginalized 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 Ogbe-Ijoh to Ogidigben 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 hyper nationalist 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.

Increased Violence in the Niger Delta and Arm Race among Oil Communities

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, Niger Delta inclusive. 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 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 militarization. Like a chain reaction, this action of the state underlines militants' proclivity to smuggle small arms from neighbouring states of West Africa in exchange for oil to prosecute their cause.

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 Organization (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.

Ogoni Struggle and Local Resistance in the Niger Delta Region

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: (a) Political control of Ogoni affairs (b) The right to control and use a fair proportion of Ogoni economic resources for Ogoni development (c) The right to protect the Ogoni environment and ecology from further degradation (d) 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 authorized MOSOP to internationalize 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 mobilization and a media campaign, with a possible option of violent resistance. Ken Saro-Wiwa was seen by the military government of Gen. Babangida as being too confrontational, militant and authoritarian, while the moderates were more inclined to the military. 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 marginalization 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, the government happily arrested Ken Saro-Wiwa and several other Ogoni activists and detained them 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 though sounded the death knell of the Ogoni struggle, but did not end it. The execution of the Ogoni activists rather than quell the violence in the region, increased it, and at the same time ushering in the period of deep discontent of the people with the Federal Government of Nigeria and the SPDC. This period saw the emergence of the three most prominent militant groups in the region, the Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force (NDPVF) led by Dokubo-Asari, Niger Delta Vigilante (NDV) led by Tom Ateke and Movement for the Emancipation of Niger Delta (MEND) led by Owezide Ekpomupolo (a.k.a. Tompolo). The militant group's attacks on oil wells and pipelines forced most foreign and local oil personnel to vacate from the oil fields, resulting in the reduction of Nigeria government oil production capacity to more than half of its former supply level (Paki, 2011). This development, including their engagement in illegal oil bunkering activities, brought them into direct conflict with the state and oil companies.

The Ijaw youths called for an end to Shell activities in the Niger Delta, and resolved to fight to the last man until the Niger Delta is liberated from the pangs of exploitation, neglect and marginalization (The Guardian on Sunday 2000:38-39). The militant 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 militarization 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 actualize their threat, Ijaw youths and other people who joined them marched in peaceful demonstration to the Government House in Yenegoa. Their main purpose was to convey their grievances through the state governor, Lt Col Paul Obi to the 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.

TABLE 1: RECORDS OF SOME OF THE OIL SPILLAGES AND BLOWN UP PIPES IN NIGER DELTA CAUSED BY THE OPERATIONS OF SHELL

YEAR	DESCRIPTION
1970	It was recorded that 30 million barrels of crude oil were spilled by Shell in the Ogoni land. It was the first of its kind.
1978	A blow out occurred in an oil well belonging to Shell situated within Obotobo, which sent crude oil spewing skyward and covering the entire village. Roofs, farms, kitchen-everything- was covered.
1993	Oil spillage occurred in Sokebolu which has polluted Obotobo, Otegbere and Ekeremor-Zion communities owing to weak maintenance culture by Shell.
1994	It was when hapless villagers were trapped in their farms by a sudden roaring inferno engulfing Shell's pipe route.
1997 March 17	There was massive oil spillage in Aleibiri which wasted up to 500 bpd for 20 days making it 10,000 barrels.
June 1998	Otuegwe I community had a leaked pipe that lasted for months with an oil spillage of over 800,000 barrels of crude from a 16 inch buried pipeline belonging to Shell.
September 1999	An explosion at the fishing and farming community of Ekakpanre by Shell. Etche oil spill went on for weeks intended by Shell and was labelled sabotage.
2001	Shell's Yorla oil field well 100 in Ogoni land was blown up and there was oil spillage. Oil pipeline that supplies crude oil to Warri and Kaduna was affected and there was oil spillage.
2003	Production platforms for deep sea bloc, the float, production storage and offloading Vessel codenamed 'Sea Eagle' was blown. This was a multi-million vessel for oil and gas processing. Vandalization of petroleum products pipeline running from Warri through Benin.
2006	The Forcados Terminal pipelines that supply over 380,000bpd crude oil to Kaduna and Warri refineries were blown up.
February, 2006	Shell Military Houseboat was blown up.
2006	Shell Odidi Excravos manifold at Ugheli was blown up. Damage of Forcados tanker platform. A platform that accounts for the 15% of Nigerian export.

Sources: Tell August 18th 1997, EAGE Report 2000. <http://www.globalissue.org/Geopolitics/Africa/Nigeria.asp>, Insider March 6th 2006, Tell August 6th 2001. Insider May 26th 2003. Ibeanu, O. (2008). *Affluence and Affliction: The Niger Delta as a Critique of Political Science of Nigeria*. UNN

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, terrorized 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 crossfire. 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 armored tanks. Rather than halting the specter 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 militarization 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 Alamieyeseigha, once stated that it would require about twenty-five billion Naira to reconstruct the town (The Guardian 2000c:6).

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. The proliferation of ethnic militia groups in the Niger Delta within the period 1990–1999 therefore led to the emergence of not less than twenty – four ethnic militia groups, according to Okumagba (2012, cited in www.irssh.com). Some of which include the Egbesu Boys of Africa (EBA), Chikoko, Ijaw National Congress, Ijaw Youth Council (IYC), Ijaw Peace Movement (IPC), Itsekiri Nationality Patriots, Movement for the Survival of the

Ogoni People (MOSOP), Niger Delta Vigilante (NDV), Niger Delta Peoples Volunteer Force (NDPVF), Niger Delta Peoples Volunteer Force (NDPVF), Niger Delta Freedom Fighters (NDFF) and Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND). The Niger Delta Avengers and Niger Delta Defence are the latest additions.

Thus, due to the heavy dependence on oil revenues from the Niger Delta, the federal government has continually responded to the increasing level of insecurity and violence in the region, (Osaghae, 1995), by suppressing dissent with military force rather than addressing the challenges of the region. This has also raised a number of issues bordering on human right violations in the Niger Delta (Ekine, 2001), as human rights have been violated severally by Nigerian security forces and those of oil company's security personnel.

Conclusion

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. Unfortunately many occasions when such violations happen, the state failed to be an impartial arbiter but rather has often sided with the oil transnationals, especially Shell, in the conflict situations, forcing oil communities to see the state, represented by government, as part and parcel of the oil companies.

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. The complex global traffic in arms is of much concern, as they pass across borders legally and illegally.

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.

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

Finally, the rate at which illegal trafficking small arms flow into the country is alarming suggesting that the either the borders are physically porous or man-made –via corruption by custom agents. This also portends a great danger to the corporate existence of the nation now and in the 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 Gshould be plugged. Effective machinery should be put in place in Nigeria to ensure the strict enforcement of laws against illegal trafficking in arms. In the case of the MNOCs, they should be made to be responsible to the local people in their areas of operations.

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