

**THE LINGERING CRISIS IN THE NIGER DELTA**  
**FIELD WORK REPORT**

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## Introduction

This report is part of doctoral fieldwork research investigating the extent to which non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and community groups in the Niger Delta have been able to make the Nigerian government and the oil multinationals more accountable for the implementing of environmental policies. Further, it sets out to assess the standards for undertaking best community practice by these key stakeholders in the oil industry. The fieldwork exercise also created the opportunity to examine what capacities NGOs and local community groups have for transforming the conflict in the Niger Delta region and what strategies they employ to this end. It also reviewed the role of environmental politics in domestic debates and in mobilizing support and concerns from the international community.

This report attempts to highlight some striking occurrences that attest to the fact that the people of the region have long waited for an intervention by successive governments which has not been forthcoming. The fieldwork embarked upon between January and April 2003 was extremely challenging considering the high level of insurgency and violence occurring in the area.

## Background Information

The name Nigeria was derived from the River Niger. The Niger Delta region<sup>1</sup> has been a flashpoint in Africa's most populous nation, Nigeria,<sup>2</sup> with a population estimated at 120 million people of over 250 dialectical ethnic groups while speaking near 400 languages. The three major tribes are the Hausa-Fulanis in the north, Yorubas in the west and the Ibos in the east. The Ijaws of the south are the fourth largest ethnic group and are a majority in the Niger Delta region with the Urhobos, Isokos, Ibibios, Itsekiris, Ukwanis, Ogonis and other minority groups. Oil was first discovered in commercial quantities in the Ijaw community of Oloibiri

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<sup>1</sup> The Niger Delta has a peculiar terrain which tends to make development difficult. For instance, it is one of the largest wetlands in the world. It covers an area of 70,000 square kilometres and is noted for its sandy coastal ridge barriers, brackish or saline mangroves, fresh water, permanent and seasonal swamp forests as well as low land rain forest. The whole area is traversed and criss-crossed by a large number of rivers, rivulets, streams, canals and creeks. The coastal line is buffeted throughout the year by the tides of the Atlantic Ocean while the mainland is subjected to regimes of flood by the various rivers, particularly River Niger. See NDDC (2001), *NDDC Profile*, Port Harcourt.

in 1956 in the Ogbia Local Government Area of Bayelsa State. Today, the inhabitants of this village community are left with nothing but damaged farmlands and polluted rivers with no electricity, potable drinking water and other basic social amenities. Like the Oloibiri situation, the locals in many of the oil-bearing communities<sup>3</sup> claim to still live in primitive conditions akin to that of the *Stone Age*, side by side with the high tech and modern facilities of the multinational community that they play host to. It is claimed that the advent of oil business in Nigeria has not really brought with it any tangible benefits; instead it ushered in high degradation of the Niger Delta environment, with concomitant poverty and much strife to the Niger Delta region.<sup>4</sup>

Today, the Niger Delta is best known as a region that sustains much oil exploration and exploitation by the agents of western economic powers. The Niger Delta basin is considered the mainstay of the Nigerian economy for its significantly high level of oil reserves. The region is also naturally endowed with viable deposits of hydrocarbon and gas reserves. Petroleum and derivatives dominate the Nigerian economy making up about 98 percent of exports, over 80 percent of government's annual revenue and 70 percent of budgetary expenditure. Crude oil resource gives the Nigeria government about US\$ 20 million a day. At the moment, Nigeria boasts of over 21 billion barrels of proven oil reserves. Nigeria is Africa's largest oil producer and the world's sixth most important exporter of crude oil with the bulk of its exports going to the United States.

To a considerable extent, the geographical location of the Niger Delta and its resources determine the traditional occupation of the people: fishing and farming. But politics is the major issue of the day in the Niger Delta. This is mainly due to the long neglect of the people's welfare by the Federal Government of Nigeria<sup>5</sup> and the nonchalant attitude of the oil

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<sup>2</sup> Nigeria became independent from Britain in 1960. The country is also the most populous black nation in the world. There are 36 states in the country with a Federal Capital Territory at Abuja.

<sup>3</sup> They are also referred to as oil producing communities or oil-rich communities. It was the campaigns against neglect and long suffering of the Ogoni people by Ken Saro-Wiwa, a minority rights crusader, environmentalist and playwright that brought the region's pitiable condition to global attention. Today, grievances are expressed in violent protests, kidnapping of oil multinationals' staff, hijacking, blockade and seizure of oil facilities.

<sup>4</sup> This was the viewpoint of Anyakwee Nisirimovu, Executive Director, Institute of Human Rights and Humanitarian Law in "Poverty in Wealth: Report on the People of the Niger Delta and the display of poverty in Wealth", Port Harcourt, September 2000, p. 3.

<sup>5</sup> The peculiarities attracted the attention of even the colonial masters. Consequently, Her Majesty's government set up Sir Henry Willink's Commission to recommend the best strategies for the development of the region which has the most difficult terrain in the country. When the Commission turned in its report in 1958, it specifically recommended that the Niger Delta region deserves special developmental attention and should, therefore, be made a special area to be developed directly by the Federal Government. It is pertinent to state that this was before crude oil became the mainstay of the Nigerian economy. Based on the report, the Niger Delta Development Board (NDDDB) was established in 1960 to cater for the unique developmental needs of the area.

multinationals. The people of the Niger Delta believe that have no substantial benefit to show for their sacrifices, despite being the ‘goose that laid the golden egg’ – the economic success that underpins the unity of the Nigerian state. They also believe they are now at that stage in history when they must actualise their own wise-saying which states that “anyone who takes what belongs to a child and raises his/her hand up; when he gets tired must bring down his hand and the child will take back his objects (what belongs to him)”<sup>6</sup>. However, security agents have always responded to demands put forward by the people of the Niger Delta in a brutal manner: many of the locals have been maimed, women raped and many have met untimely deaths. Local villages like Odi, Opia-Ikenyan, Okerenkoko and Ogoniland have been destroyed by the Nigerian military through the use of excessive force in counter insurgency measures.<sup>7</sup>

The rising agitation by the people attempts to draw national and international attention to these social, political, economic and environmental injustices. This effort is supported by many of the existing NGOs<sup>8</sup> and civil groups. A plethora of these have sprung up in the delta over the years and include the Environmental Rights Action/Friends of the Earth, Nigeria (ERA/FOEN), Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP), Niger Delta Wetlands Centre (NDWC), Niger Delta Human and Environmental Rescue Organisation (ND-HERO), Ijaw Council for Human Rights (ICHR), the Niger Delta Focus (NDF), the Women Initiatives Network (WINET), African Environmental Action Network (EANET-Africa), Niger-Delta Oil Producing Communities Development Organisation (NIDOPCODO), Anpez Centre for Environment and Development (ACFED) and Niger Delta Peace Coalition (NDPC). These are just a few of the environmental, human rights and civil society organisations in the region.

The unrests and expression of the feelings of neglect by the people finally led to the establishment of the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC)<sup>9</sup> by the current government. The primary mission of this commission is to seriously tackle the issues of

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The NDDC was at best moribund before the outbreak of the civil war seven years later. For more, see NDDC (2001) op cit.

<sup>6</sup> Blessing A. Nwoka, “The Politics of Self-Determination and Identity of the Minorities of the Niger Delta”, in G.O.M. Tasié (ed.) *The Niger: The Past, Present and the Way Forward*, Abstracts of papers at the Conference on the Niger Delta, Port Harcourt, 6-9 December 2000.

<sup>7</sup> Military brutality has been widely reported internationally by Human Rights Watch (1999), *The Price of Oil: Corporate Responsibility and Human Rights Violations in Nigeria's Oil Producing Communities*, World Council of Churches (1996), *Ogoni: The Struggle Continues*, Geneva, WCC, Amnesty International, Project Underground, Friends of the Earth International, International Alert *et cetera*.

<sup>8</sup> Interview with the National Coordinator of Niger Delta NGOs Forum, revealed that true NGO culture has not taken root in the country for there are several NGOs that are formed without clear focus or objective and as such flounder and grope without clear direction.

<sup>9</sup> The NDDC is an interventionist agency established by the ruling Federal Government in 2001 to meet the developmental aspirations of the age-long neglected people of the oil-rich Niger Delta.

development facing the region. To this end, the NDDC is envisioned to “offer a lasting solution to the socio-economic difficulties of the Niger Delta region”<sup>10</sup>. This is expected to reduce the growing restiveness in the region.

### **Prevailing Tensions**

Travels across the three core states of the Niger Delta - Delta, Bayelsa and Rivers States – revealed how the instability in the region has translated into violent political, socio-economic, ethnic and communal conflicts. In the urban cities in particular there has been a resurgence of the ethnic animosities leading to considerable violence and destruction. For example, in Warri - the commercial nerve centre of Delta State<sup>11</sup> - a crisis<sup>12</sup> erupted in March 1997 involving the three ethnic groups in the city. The Itsekiris versus the Ijaws on one side and the Itsekiris versus the Urhobos on the other. The conflict revolved mainly around issues of political representation, land, political justice and social contract. At the root cause of the crisis was the change of the seat of local government headquarters from Ogbe-Ijoh (an Ijaw community) to Ogidigben (an Itsekiri community) in 1997. Although the discord amongst the various groups has been traced to the formations left behind by some of the early national political leaders,<sup>13</sup> the people had over the years lived together, inter-married and peacefully participated in various local endeavours.

Today, the security situation has compelled most of the oil companies to move to Port Harcourt which is a relatively safer city for oil business in the zone. Most companies now employ their own security units. For instance, Shell in Nigeria has a special arm of the Nigeria Police Force, trained by the national police force but funded and paid by the multinational company. The riots of January/February 2003 were attributed to the manoeuvres in the party primaries of the ruling political party, the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), which is the major party amongst the 30 registered political parties that participated in the April 2003 elections. Many attributed the disturbances to the perceived delineation of

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<sup>10</sup> NDDC (2001), *op.cit.*, p.8.

<sup>11</sup> Delta State is referred to as the ‘Big Heart’ for it is considered to be a microcosm of the Nigerian state due to the diversity of interests and conflicting issues that has long remain unresolved. It contributes to the federal purse more than any of the other states in the country.

<sup>12</sup> In the wake of the crisis, the residence of the foremost Ijaw leader, Chief E. K. Clark, was burnt down on the 25<sup>th</sup> of March 1997. His security personnel were killed by youths believed to be of the Itsekiri nationality. Interview with this leader was very interesting for he is now more on the vanguard for peaceful resolution of the conflict. He also urged the government to sign into law the onshore/offshore oil dichotomy bill which has broken relations between his people of the Niger Delta and the Northern leaders.

new political boundaries in Warri-South Local Government Area as part of the exercises of the state electoral body - the Delta State Independent Electoral Commission - because of perceived political imbalance by some of the ethnic groups in the local council area.

The Ijaw Youth Council (IYC) is the leading peoples' organisation at the forefront of the struggle for resource control and environmental justice in the Niger Delta. It was formed on the 11<sup>th</sup> of December 1998 with the issuance of the Kaiama Declaration that revealed the unabated damage to the environment as due to uncontrolled exploration and exploitation of crude oil and natural gas which has led to numerous oil spillages, uncontrolled gas flaring, the opening up of forests for loggers, indiscriminate canalisation, flooding, land subsistence, coastal erosion, earth tremors etc. This document generated massive controversy and led to the massacre of hundreds of Ijaw youths in the hands of the security agents.

Despite being labelled as one of the most volatile militant groups in the region, the Ijaw Youth Council (IYC) has continued to intervene to prevent the involvement of some youth groups in sea-piracy activities in the riverine communities which is still prevailing especially in the Bomadi Local Government Area<sup>14</sup> axis of the region. The group had in the past intervened in the release of expatriate staff of the oil companies that have been victims of hostage taking, kidnapping and hijacking by armed youths in the region. Such activities have been labelled as an anti-Ijaw struggle that is geared towards self-determination and resource control. Therefore, the IYC has consistently taken their campaigns to the rural communities, government and the oil multinationals.

## **Violence and Killings**

The recent outbreak of hostilities in Warri was extremely disturbing. More than 15-truck loads of Nigerian army personnel from the David Ejoor Barracks (amphibious battalion) were dispatched to the troubled areas. There was sporadic gunfire, several buildings and vehicles were destroyed,<sup>15</sup> and at least five civilians and a soldier were killed in the crossfire of the different warring parties.<sup>16</sup> Movement in the city was restricted, with civilians made to

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<sup>13</sup> The change of the title of Olu of Itsekiri to Olu of Warri in 1952 by Chief Obafemi Awolowo, leader of the then Action Group political party, was identified as the root cause of this age long acrimony.

<sup>14</sup> Bomadi has been the headquarters of the Western Ijaws but now houses the administrative secretariat of the Bomadi Local Government Council in Delta State.

<sup>15</sup> I remembered a scene in which some youths wanted to set a bungalow on fire. The occupants were seen pleading that the owner of the building is of the Urhobo ethnic group. They heeded to the plea and torched some buildings owned by Itsekiris in Ekuremu and Karine Streets.

<sup>16</sup> Eyewitness account revealed that there were more casualties.

undergo thorough searches with their hands raised up, some suffering beatings with horsewhips from the soldiers. The situation created high levels of anxiety and most persons fled from danger zones with any *okada*<sup>17</sup> (commercial motorbike) in sight. In the middle of these events, residents gathered in local churches for vigils, offering prayers for the return of peace.<sup>18</sup> Many residents were displaced<sup>19</sup> from the Okere-Idumusobo area where great destruction occurred. Also, there was stampede and greater destructions in the Polokor market area of Okumagba estate.<sup>20</sup> The state government swiftly reacted by imposing a dusk to dawn curfew. This enabled the soldiers to manage the crisis to a state of temporary peace but people remained uncertain about events possible in the next days.

### **Military Occupation**

In the third week of March 2003, locals and oil workers in the Western Niger Delta were fleeing the zone as militants were engaged in fierce gun battles with the government security forces. The clashes saw several village communities<sup>21</sup> such as Okerenkoko, Ogbogbene, Benikrukru, Inikorogha, Oburu, Kunukunama, Opuedebubo, Oporoza, Kokodiagbene, Tebujor and many more, invaded by the military and then destroyed. This led to scores of deaths among the ethnic militias, local residents, staff of the oil multinationals, and some members of the government security forces (the navy and army).<sup>22</sup> The situation forced the two leading oil multinationals (Shell and Chevron-Texaco) to slash daily production by about 156,000 barrels per day. Thousands of the locals were evacuated from the Escravos area<sup>23</sup> to Warri. A domestic Chevron-Texaco worker was shot dead in the early days of the attacks on oil flow stations. Many sustained injuries and a bullet fired by the militias pierced through

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<sup>17</sup> The *okada* is the most available and fastest means of intra-city transport in the region.

<sup>18</sup> This is the usual practice in nearly all the churches on the last Friday of every month in this predominantly Christian area. In one such vigil, worshippers prayed for the return of peace in the Oil City and problem-free general elections in the country.

<sup>19</sup> Over 400 persons were displaced from their homes. Many were seen sleeping on the corridors of well-wishers. Uncompleted buildings became makeshift homes for many too.

<sup>20</sup> There was no electricity in this Urhobo dominated area but the illumination was from flames of the buildings set on fire by the rampaging Urhobo youths. This was in reaction to the destruction of Idama Hotel and other properties belonging to the Urhobos by youths believed to be of the Itsekiri ethnic group.

<sup>21</sup> This was revealed in a press release of the Federated Niger Delta Ijaw Communities (FNDIC), 'Missing Rifle Syndrome'. 28/04/2003.

<sup>22</sup> Engaging some of the leaders of the militant group, the Federated Niger Delta Ijaw Communities, in interviews revealed that the group is fully prepared to set the oil city of Warri on fire if their demands for equal political participation in the Warri South-West local council area are not met. They claim to stand for justice and oppose the attitude of the military men firing at the local youths.

<sup>23</sup> The Escravos is a riverine area in the Western Niger Delta with a high presence of oil multinationals' activities. The locals here are mainly Ijaws and Itsekiris.

one of the Shell helicopters as it evacuated staff, sustaining damage but managing to escape safely. The unrest caused jitters in the international oil market already uneasy over the conflict between Iraq and the US-led coalition.

At the height of the crisis, heavy troop deployments were witnessed in Warri. It was a difficult task walking through many of the military checkpoints and engaging parties in the conflict in interviews. Two US warships were donated to the Nigerian Navy by the Pentagon and were deployed to the region to protect oil facilities.<sup>24</sup> The United States Government did also donate \$50,000 as humanitarian assistance to the Ijaws and Itsekiris, who were displaced following the communal violence. The donation was made by the United States Agency for International Development's programme officer to the International Foundation for Education and Self-help (IFESH), an international NGO.

## **Conclusion**

To a considerable extent, the relationship between the social movements in the Niger Delta and the state has been, and remains, one of mutual distrust. The people of the Niger Delta want a future for their unborn children and therefore are demanding a better deal, particularly for being an oil-rich region. But the government wants to continue to maintain absolute control of the resources from the region while the multinationals strive for profit maximisation by parleying with the state.

The crisis in the Western Niger Delta has also been attributed to the inability of the federal government to genuinely resolve the conflict by ensuring and providing an acceptable political climate for the three ethnic groups. The aggressive posture of the government towards some groups is considered to be a strategy to further disunite the various ethnic nationalities so that a common platform will be impossible to be set-up to confront the excesses of the federal government.

For the Ijaws, they sincerely condemn the deployment of troops in their region which has resulted in torture, looting and killings. They also believe that after four decades of devastating environmental pollution and double standards by the oil companies, this occupation is the principal cause of the tension. Many of the locals also believe that no responsible oil company can operate behind the terror of armed soldiers. They are therefore asking the oil companies to cease their activities in the region until all military and



paramilitary units are removed, all activists are released from prison, and the situation is peacefully resolved.

There seems to be some hope. For instance, the government has set up a Presidential Committee led by the Minister of Defence to look into the remote causes of the Warri Crisis in the Delta State. Interestingly, the government has “committed the oil multinationals to ending routine gas flaring by 2008 through effective economic utilisation of the gas for the benefit of the country”.<sup>25</sup> This will go a long way towards checking the negative impact on the environment that accompanies oil exploration and production activities, and will consequently boost the utilization of the flared gas in creating wealth.

Despite the various ethnic divisions, the various peoples’ organisations in the Niger Delta have collectively called for the reintroduction of the revenue allocation principle as practiced in the past and as entrenched in the Independence Constitution of 1964 which, according to them, was the condition under which the federating units agreed to come together as a nation. They also demand a review of the current 13 percent derivation formula which is considered insignificant and cannot redress the devastation in the Niger Delta. As they also come under the umbrella of the South-South Peoples Conference (SSOPEC), they have combined to demand that the president, without further delay signs into law the onshore/offshore dichotomy abrogation bill as passed by the National Assembly in September 2002.<sup>26</sup> While also calling for the abrogation of all inimical laws related to petroleum exploration and exploitation, the different groups also have demanded that the oil multinationals should relocate their administrative headquarters to their areas of operation in the Niger Delta.

Finally, the Niger Delta people are demanding along with other groups in the country the need for the immediate convocation of a Sovereign National Conference (SNC) to create a forum for the various ethnic formations to agree on the modalities of staying together in a Nigerian nation. Many do not yet believe in the ‘Nigerian project’ and considered it a farce along with the assertion of one of the early nationalists, Chief Obafemi Awolowo<sup>27</sup> as “a mere geographical expression”. They are also urging the international community and human

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<sup>24</sup> Vanguard Newspaper, “Navy, Shell beef up security following threat to attack installations” Tuesday, April 29, 2003. Online: <http://www.vanguardngr.com/articles/2002/national/nr129042003.html>

<sup>25</sup> Shell Petroleum Development Company Briefing Notes (2001), *Challenges of Gas Flares-Out in Nigeria*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, Lagos, SPDC, p.11.

<sup>26</sup> The bill listed in the House of Representatives on September 24, 2002 is the fastest bill to be passed by the House. See Online: <http://www.akwaibomstategov.com/akwaibomstategov/nDetail.cfm?RecordID=201> “House okays onshore/offshore abrogation bill” 09/06/2003.

<sup>27</sup> Chief Obafemi Awolowo was the leader of the opposition in the first and Second Republics. He was the founder and leader of the Action Group (AG) and Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN). These political parties controlled and administered the western region of the country.

rights organisations to put pressure on the central government to strive to ensure true federalism, stability and equitable development in all regions of the country.

*Researching the Niger Delta crisis is an effort to bring analytical rigour to bear on the key issues in the Nigerian body politic that account for continuous violence. These have even threatened the transition project from dictatorship to democratic governance. Issues of socio-economic development, peace, security and stability and progress have resurfaced as critical national questions.*