

Pipeline Surveillance Contracts and the Emerging Oil-Related Conflicts in Rivers State, Nigeria

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Abstract

The award of pipeline surveillance contracts (PSCs) to ex-militant commanders has set the basis for a new wave of on-going conflicts in Rivers State. These lucrative PSCs constitute a new arena of 'do or die' struggles between and among ex-militant, cult, gang, vigilante groups, violence business people, community organizations, state actors and politicians. This article examined the effects of these PSCs by Transnational Oil Corporations and government agencies on recurring oil-related conflicts in Rivers State from 2009 – 2021. The Marxian political economy approach was employed to guide data collection and analysis. It relied on secondary data collected from libraries, national/international agencies and internet resources. The contents of the secondary data collected were analyzed to describe how the PSCs to ex-militant leaders have generated on-going armed struggles between beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries over the control of oil pipelines in Rivers State. It was observed that the lack of local communities' partnership in Nigeria's oil industry necessitated the existence of PSCs to ex-militants as 'payments for peace' and to prevent oil sabotage and theft. However, instead of achieving this purpose, existing PSCs have ensued conflicts, pipeline vandalism and oil theft. It was accordingly recommended that, among others: local communities should be involved in pipeline surveillance – they should be given at least 45 % of the PSCs and 55% to professional competent firms. A standing 'Community-Security Consultative Committee' comprising all stakeholders should be set up to amicably address and resolve issues.

Keywords: *Transnational Oil Corporation, Pipeline Surveillance Contract, Conflict, Rivers State.*

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Background to the Study

There is a new wave of conflict in Rivers State in particular and oil-bearing states in general that is generated by the desire to secure lucrative contracts of protecting the oil pipelines of Transnational Oil Corporations (TOCs). This power tussle is worsening the distortion of the environment of Rivers State and generating conflict in the oil-bearing communities and beyond.

Pipelines are key oil and gas infrastructure that transport crude and refined products in the oil industry network. Since oil exploration began in the Niger Delta, the region has been inundated with numerous pipelines conveying products across and beyond the region (United Nations Development Programme, UNDP, 2011; Ebiri and Jeremiah, 2019). After the foremost oil well was struck in commercial quantities in 1956 at Oloibiri, Bayelsa State (Niger Delta) by Shell-D'Arcy Exploration Parties (now Shell Petroleum Development Company (Nigeria) Ltd.), crude oil exploration has continued in the Niger Delta region till date (Niger Delta Development Commission, NDDC, 2006). According to the Rivers State Government, RSG (2019), more than 40% of Nigeria's output of crude oil and gas resources is produced in the State. After the first discovery of crude oil in commercial scale at Oloibiri in Bayelsa State in 1956, successive discoveries of oil wells were made at Afam in 1957, and Ebubu and Bomu in 1958, all-in present-day Rivers State. The State has become firmly established as one of the major oil producing centres in the country. Most of the transnational oil and gas companies in Nigeria and abroad are based either in Rivers State or have offices and branches in the State. These companies include, Shell Petroleum Development Company (Nigeria) Ltd., Chevron Nigeria Limited, Total-Elf-Fina, Nigeria Agip Oil Company, Saipem Nigeria Limited, Dawoo Nigeria Limited, Nigeria Liquefied Natural Gas Limited. The State also has two petroleum refineries.

Over time, inappropriate construction activities by TOCs for oil and gas set-up (infrastructure) has exposed the environment of Rivers State and other oil-bearing states in the Niger Delta region to various forms of hazards. For instance, over 12,714 km of pipelines have been laid to convey oil and gas in all kinds of topography across the region (Ebiri and Jeremiah, 2019). Several of these oil pipelines are laid across protected and other sensitive areas/sites. The condition and age of these pipes also varies; many are decaying and a lingering source of spills and leakages as well as vulnerable to third party sabotage.

As part of measures to ensure necessary protection of oil pipelines/installations from sabotage and oil theft in the region, the Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN) and the TOCs have initiated and awarded Pipelines Surveillance Contracts (PSCs) to private security firms owned by ex-militant commanders after the 2009 Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN) amnesty. However, instead of solving the intended problem, the PSCs have led to a new trend of conflicts between holders of existing PSCs and other local rival networks (ex-militant, cult, gang and vigilante groups) over the control of pipelines in the Niger Delta region. In Rivers State in particular, these on-going conflicts between ex-militant beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries of PSCs has increased pipeline vandalism and other related crimes mainly instigated by disadvantaged groups and other neutral oil thieves. The new wave of conflicts is

spreading fast and getting complex as belligerents are often not distinct from the civilian population thereby creating mass tension and general insecurity in the State. The objective of this article is therefore to examine the effects of Pipeline Surveillance Contracts on emerging oil conflicts in Rivers State.

Methodology

The paper is descriptive and qualitative in nature. It relied on data derived mainly from secondary sources to reflect conflicts emanating from the award of pipeline surveillance contracts (PSCs) to private security firms owned by ex-militant commanders in Rivers State. Secondary sources here include government publications, reports by national and international organizations, textbooks, journals, newspapers and internet resources. These were collected from libraries (including e-libraries) and through the Internet. The Content Analysis method was employed to analyze the contents of the data collected in order to examine the effects of existing PSCs on the new wave of power tussles over the control of oil pipelines in the study area. The paper is essentially an analytical one, focusing on the relationship between the general characteristics of the PSCs and recurring trends conflicts in Rivers State and other oil-bearing states in the Niger Delta.

Study Area

Rivers State in Niger Delta region of Nigeria is the study area for this article. Rivers State is one of the leading coastal crude oil-producing States of Nigeria. It is one of the three Core Oil Producing Areas (COPAs) of Bayelsa, Delta and Rivers (Azaiki, 2003; Etekpe, 2007). It is one of the present nine oil producing States of Nigeria - Abia, Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo, Imo, Ondo and Rivers - (Ekpo, 2004; NDDC, 2006). The state capital is Port Harcourt City and it has 23 Local Government Areas (LGAs) namely Abua/Odual, Ahoada East, Ahoada West, Akuku Toru, Andoni, Asari-Toru, Bonny, Degema, Emohua, Eleme, Etche, Gokana, Ikwerre, Khana, Obia/Akpor, Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni, Ogu/Bolo, Okrika, Omumma, Opobo/Nkoro, Oyigbo, Port-Harcourt, Tai (Federal Republic of Nigeria, FRN, 1999). Rivers state contains mangrove swamps, tropical rainforest, and many rivers (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2013). Below is a map of Rivers State displaying the 23 (twenty-three) LGAs and their headquarters.



Figure 1: Map of Rivers State Showing Local Government Areas and Headquarters
Source: https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Rivers-State-Showing-Local-Government-Areas-and-Headquarters_fig1_288986350 [accessed 10 Jun, 2021]

Theoretical Framework and Conceptual Clarifications

Theoretical Framework

Over time, the effects of the activities of Transnational Oil Corporations (TOCs) on the environment and recurring conflicts in Rivers State has prompted myriads of intellectual research interests. The perspectives of these investigations are informed by the investigators' perceptions of the problems. In exploring the on-going new multidimensional conflicts arising from the award of pipeline surveillance contracts (PSCs) by TOCs and the Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN) to ex-militant commanders in Rivers State, this article used the Marxian political economy as its theoretical framework.

In comparison to other contending approaches, this method of analysis is quite useful, especially in a social science inquiry such as this, because Marxian political economy combines the elements of history, class, economy and the state. The primacy of material conditions in the explanation of social life and relations is the root of this variant of political economy (Ake, 1981; Okoli, 2009). Besides, it offers predictions alongside explanations to social problems. This justifies Ekekwe's (2015), assertion that, apart from the Marxian political economy approach, no better tool of analysis for understanding the capitalist mode of production exists.

A distinctive feature of Marxian political economy method of analysis is that it encourages the student to take a systematic account of the interactions between different elements of social life, especially economic, social and political structure as well as the belief system. This method absolutely recognises the interrelationship of these structures, with particular emphasis that the economic factor is the determining element of society and greatly affects the character of the other aspects of the society. That is to say that the availability of knowledge of the economic fosters the knowledge of the general character of the other systems – social, political, belief, etc. The interest here is mainly in the inter relatedness and interdependence of the various social structures, and how they are historically determined (Ake, 1981; Ekekwe, 2009 and 2015).

Transnational Oil Corporation

A transnational corporation (TNC) is a national establishment in two or more independent nations, working in association with the one at the headquarters and controlling the others either wholly or in part. Both at the International Court of Justice and in the United States of America's courts, a TNC's nationality is determined based on its country of incorporation. Almost 37,000 TNCs existed worldwide in 1990; and this increased to 65,000 TNCs with more than 850,000 foreign subsidiaries and affiliates in 2002. Shinsato (2005), observed that, less industrialized countries turn to TNCs to encourage international investment in hopes of improving the local economy. In turn, TNCs are attracted to the opportunity to lower production costs through weak environmental standards and cheap labor. Nevertheless, as domestic economies have globalized and global economies have modernized, the economic and political clout of the TNCs has become so huge – the gross domestic product (GDP) of many TNCs is larger than the GDPs of many small nations, such that sovereign states have lost their positions of dominance in the global economy. The TNCs are now so powerful that governments are unable to stop exploitation in their own states.

Unfortunately, despite their vast influence and their substantial role in the degradation and destruction of the environment which subsequently harms human populations, TNCs are not yet signatories to binding international instruments. Virtually unrestrained by international instruments and domestic laws, TNCs are safe from liability for environmental destruction and resultant human rights violations. Globalization has thus created powerful non-state actors that may violate human rights in ways that were not contemplated during the development of the modern human rights movement (Shinsato, 2005: United Nations, UN, 2006).

Pipeline Surveillance Contracts (PSCs)

According to Bassey (2012), oil spills and gas flaring have attracted the world's attention as the twin most evident attacks on the Niger Delta. The cause of gas flaring in the region is quite obvious and is squarely responsible by Transnational Oil Corporations (TOCs) and the ineffective or unwillingness of the Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN) to enforce its relevant laws to stop flaring of gas in the country. Conversely, the cause of oil spillages/leakages especially from pipelines have been very controversial and contentious between TOCs and host communities, particularly when claims for compensation arises with regards to spills. The frequency and volume of most of these leakages from pipelines have

compounded and complicated the controversies leading to series of conflicts between TOCs and host communities across the Niger Delta region. While TOCs attribute the incessant leakages from pipeline to sabotage and oil theft, host communities and other commentators argue that they are caused by industry faults such as corrosion due to age of pipe or poor maintenance (Steiner, 2008; United Nations Environment Programme, UNEP, 2011; Bassey, 2012; Allen, 2014).

Generally, sabotage of oil pipelines/installations in the region can be traced to the perceived alienation of the people from the oil wealth in their communities since the beginning of oil exploration in 1956 (Etekpe and Okolo 2010). In this connection, organised attacks on oil installations (infrastructure) by militant groups in the region paralysed Nigeria's oil productions and earnings by over 50% between January and August in 2008 alone. The attacks against the obvious injustice on the region perhaps informed the former (late) president Umaru Musa Yar'Adua to establish the Ministry of Niger Delta in September, 2008 to mainstream the development of the region into national policies and to help curb the steadily increasing insecurity on oil pipelines/installations (Adibeet *al* 2018).

In the second quarter in 2009, the then President Yar'Adua announced and initiated an amnesty package to pardon, reintegrate and develop willingly surrendered militant groups from the region. This led to the reintegration of over 26,000 militants including their leaders. Remarkably, the amnesty initiative also introduced the pipeline surveillance contracts (PSCs) in the nation's oil industry. By 2012, the FGN awarded some PSCs to ex-militant leaders in the region and justified the awards as based on national interest. However, in 2014, more PSCs were awarded to private firms owned also by ex-militants. The FGN justified these fresh PSCs due to the increasing rate of oil theft in the region (Adibeet *al* 2018).

It is at backdrop of the foregoing that government agencies and TOCs initiated the award of pipeline surveillance contracts (PSCs) to private firms owned by ex-militant commanders and other individual businessmen to safeguard and prevent pipeline vandalism and oil theft in the Niger Delta region (Stakeholder Democracy Network, SDN. 2019). ularly, after the return of civil rule in the country in 1999 (Stakeholder Democracy Network, SDN. 2019).

Effects of Pipeline Surveillance Contracts on Emerging Oil Conflicts in Rivers State

Conflict is considered as one of the natural and unavoidable elements of human life. Generally speaking, conflict is linked with notions related to antagonistic (opposing, incompatible) interests, competition, misunderstanding, rationally irreconcilable goals and interests, and political manipulations. Conflict involves the failure of parties to arrive at commonly acceptable agreements. This relates to all categories of conflicts that are between persons (individuals), in families, within communities or those between ethnic or militant groups/organizations and the state (Buckley-Zistel, 2008; Adegbonmire, 2015).

With respect to conflicts in the Niger Delta region, Allen (2014) postulates that the failure of the Nigerian state to enforce its environmental laws and the failure of Transnational Oil Corporations (TOCs) to eliminate oil and gas pollution is related to three oil and ecological linked conflicts that have characterised the region, namely: Resource Curse Conflict (RCC) – is

how oil trade and wealth has underdeveloped indigenous population in many aspects, for example, loss of land and biodiversity ecosystems that has been the bedrock of the local economy; Local Resource Scarcity Conflict (LRSC) – is the loss of land which is the main tool of production in the region; and, Complex Conflict (CC) – which combines the features of RCC and LRSC including the political, social, economic views or interests of proponents. In this connection, this article deals with oil-related conflicts especially those emanating from the award of pipeline surveillance contracts (PSCs) by the government of Nigeria and TOCs to private firms owned by ex-militant leaders in Rivers State from 2009 – (September) 2021.

As was indicated above, the existing Pipeline Surveillance Contracts (PSCs) officially started in Nigeria as a follow-up deal to the 2009 Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN) amnesty to Niger Delta militant groups. In 2012, the first set of PSCs were awarded to identified notable ex-militant leaders and subsequently, more PSCs were awarded to new private firms owned by ex-militant leaders in 2014 and beyond. The PSCs by government agencies and Transnational Oil Corporations (TOCs) to these private security firms of ex-militant leaders are supposedly to guard against oil pipeline sabotage, monitor and promptly report any breaks on pipelines to the TOCs and relevant government authorities (Adibeet *al* 2018). The processes leading to the award of these PSCs is secret for security reasons according to the government. So, they are not transparent and there is no competition in the process of selecting the private security firms. They are also not subject to the provisions of the Procurement Act of 2007. Besides, while the geographic scope and oil pipelines/installations to each firm may be known, the contract value differs from company to company even though two companies may have equal responsibilities. Usually, the contract values of the PSCs depend on the number of 'boys' each ex-militant leader claims to control or appealed (Stakeholder Democracy Network, SDN, 2019). Table 1 below shows the general characteristics of the PSCs in the Niger Delta region.

Table 1: General Characteristics of Pipeline Surveillance Contracts (PSCs) in Niger Delta

S/NO	Characteristics	Remarks
1.	PSCs are awarded to private firms owned by ex-militant leaders by government agencies and oil corporations.	The first set of PSCs were awarded in 2012; and more in 2014 onwards due to increasing pipeline sabotage.
2.	Each oil corporation awards its own PSCs for its oil pipelines/installations.	The number of PSCs in an area depends on the number of oil corporations with oil infrastructure there.
3.	Surveillance contractors are supposed to monitor oil pipelines, identify any breaks and protect them from sabotage.	The FGN claims that this is for national interest.
4.	PSCs are not embedded in any security, environmental and development framework.	PSCs are not part of known holistic strategy.
5.	Contents of PSCs are not made public; for security reasons according to the government.	PSCs are regarded as security items.
6.	PSCs are not subject to the provisions of the Public Procurement Act of 2007.	PSCs are exempted from competition and transparency on security grounds.
7.	PSCs have definite geographic scope and duration.	This is in terms of coverage of pipelines and interval of contract renewal – most PSCs are renewed annually.
8.	Contract (amount) value of PSCs depends on the number of ‘persons/boys’ controlled by the ex-militant firm.	This involves those to be pacified financially for not engaging in pipeline sabotage.
9.	Beneficiaries of PSCs wields and enjoys immense political influence.	They have access to the corridors of power which they often employ to influence decisions in host communities.

Source: Compiled by Authors

Short-Term Effects of PSCs

According to the SDN (2019), PSCs constitute a contradiction (misnomer) as there have been no concrete surveillance of oil pipelines but rather, these PSCs are used to appease beneficiary ex-militant leaders and their groups from involving in oil sabotage and to reward party loyalists. As SDN (2019) also noted, in the short run, the PSCs are like the 2009 FGN amnesty payments to militants which are not embedded within any holistic framework for peace and sustainable development in the Niger Delta region. The underlying (agenda) purpose of the PSCs is rather partly to cover calls for the TOCs to replace their ageing pipelines and partly to secure local support (not necessarily host communities) but mainly potential threat groups like ex-militants and allies of political parties in power. For instance, the PSCs were started by the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) led federal government in 2012 and when the All Progressives Congress (APC) took over power in May, 2015, President Muhammadu Buhari unexpectedly discontinued the payments of PSCs in June, 2015. The decision of the APC led federal government to stop extant PSCs in 2015 was shortly followed by a revival of militant attacks on oil pipelines/installation predominantly in Delta State. Also, at the state government level, private security firms jostling for PSCs have been known to shift their political affiliations to the party in power in the state as political strategy to secure such

contracts. In a similar vein, party members who are staff in TOCs in charge of awarding PSCs also manipulate the process to ensure that only private security firms owned by members of their party secure PSCs in such TOCs.

Long-Term Conflict Implications of PSCs in Rivers State

The long-term risks of PSCs are largely the effects of the on-going widespread insecurity being experienced in oil bearing states like Rivers State. As an unplanned security arrangement, the PSCs are like 'protection treaties' between the government/TOCs with ex-militants/local violence businesspeople who are involved in the PSCs. Because of the huge sums of money involved and other benefits they attract, rather than re-enforcing local support, the PSCs have actually created resentment among other ex-militants and local violence businesspeople who are not involved. The conflicts between these rival groups as a result of the existing PSCs are quite destructive to lives, to the environment and properties particularly oil pipelines as well as resuscitating/revitalizing oil bunkering in the region generally. According to Eboh (2020), oil bearing communities, through their umbrella body, the Host Communities of Nigeria, Producing Oil and Gas (HOSCON) have alleged that existing oil pipeline surveillance contracts are treating the peace of Niger Delta. The grassroots body noted that private security companies executing the PSCs in Nigeria are fueling conflicts in the Niger Delta region. Through its National Chairman, Dr. Mike Emuh, HOSCON also expressed worry that the FGN is not keeping to its local content policy by engaging some 'foreign' firms as surveillance contractors of Nigerian waterways. In Rivers State, the mayhem and insecurity caused by some 'unknown gun-men' that compelled the State government to impose a dusk to dawn curfew in the State from May 1 - July 6, 2021 has some undertone of conflicts related to PSCs.

The PSCs to private security firms have undermined government security agencies in the Niger Delta region in general and in Rivers State in particular. There is now hardly any proper distinction between state security and private security operatives in region. In addition, because of the huge sums of money involved, those executing PSCs often get the support armed state security operative to complement their operations whereas by law, they are supposed to be unarmed.

In actual practice, the existence of PSCs in Rivers State (Niger Delta) has led to the re-emergence of armed groups or private armies. Ex-militants handling the PSCs in the State/region maintain their separate private armies and can get necessary re-enforcement from state security agencies. In 2018, a joint military action between holders of PSCs and state security agencies caused grave damages on some communities including Bille in Rivers State. Conversely, this factor has instigated rival ex-militant groups in Rivers State and beyond to also form their own private armies in the power tussle over the control of oil pipelines in their respective states (SDN, 2019).

The current regime of PSCs in the region is empowering the ex-militants who hold PSCs instead of ensuring the protection of oil pipelines. As local violence businesspeople, the ex-militants who control the PSCs are known to eat/demand benefits from all potential 'clients' such as the owners of pipelines, oil thieves and facility maintenance contractors. As long as oil

remains the foundation of Nigeria's mono-cultural economy, and with 40 percent of Nigeria's oil production in Rivers State, the existing PSCs to ex-militants is only setting the basis for future conflicts in the State/region. These very lucrative PSCs constitute a new pitch of 'do or die' contest between and among state actors, politicians, ex-militants and businesspeople. As SDN (2019) observed, this contest became very intense in post-2015 when President Buhari decided to resume the PSCs but in a decentralized manner, by splitting the contracts using smaller numerous private security firms. Thus, most of the ex-militants involved in the bigwig private security companies such as A def and Bajeros, pulled out and established their own private security firms. This has heightened the contest by the numerous firms (both old and newcomers) seeking to grab these mouth-watering PSCs in Rivers State (Niger Delta region). The complexity of the contest is such that while holders of PSCs seeks to annihilate potential competitors, those left out at any given period carry out sabotage operations such as pipeline damage and oil theft to discredit the surveillance competence of beneficiaries. The contest is highly volatile and deadly causing general insecurity in oil bearing states.

The conflict that PSCs generate is currently having two major negative effects on the people of oil-bearing communities. First, frequent sabotage of oil pipelines is worsening the distortion of the environment of host communities. The steadily deepening contamination of the soil from leakages of broken pipelines poses serious dangers to life – plant, animal and human in host communities. Second, the seemingly short-term lucrative 'livelihood alternatives' that existing PSCs have instigated in the form of either pipeline sabotage or pipeline security-agents is fast displacing other meaningful long-term livelihood pursuits and intellectual creativity in the people of host communities. Even with the high risks associated with pipeline sabotage and artisanal refinery compared to other conventional ventures, members of most oil-bearing communities still engage in this high-risks oil business because of the huge and quick turnover involved. Table 2 below is a list of selected Table 4... Selected oil-related conflicts generated by PSCs in Rivers State from 2014 – (September) 2021.

Table 2: Selected Oil-Related Conflicts generated by Pipeline Surveillance Contracts in Rivers State, Nigeria, 2014 – (September) 2021

S/No	Conflict Location	Date	Belligerents/Parties
1.	Owerewere, Abua/Odual LGA	April, 2014	Sabotage operation on Shell Nigeria pipelines by suspected vandals to spite surveillance contractors
2.	Emago/Kugbo, Abua/Odual LGA	November, 2015	Sabotage operation on Agip pipelines by suspected vandals to spite surveillance contractors
3.	Ubeta, Ahoada-West LGA	September, 2019	Sabotage operation on Agip pipelines by suspected vandals to spite surveillance contractors
4.	Ubeta, Ahoada-West LGA	December, 2019	Sabotage operation on Agip pipelines by suspected vandals to spite surveillance contractors
5.	Komkom, Oyigbo LGA	June, 2019	Sabotage operation on Shell pipelines by suspected vandals to spite surveillance contractors
6.	Eneka, Obio-Akpor LGA	November, 2019	Sabotage operation on Shell pipelines by suspected vandals to spite surveillance contractors
7.	Eveku and Rumodogo 1, Emohua LGA	February, 2017	Sabotage operation on NLNG pipelines by suspected vandals to spite surveillance contractors
8.	Bille, Degema LGA	October, 2018	Joint operations involving the military and surveillance contractors and suspected pipeline vandals.
9.	Oduoha and Elibrada, Emohua LGA	January, 2021	Sabotage operation on NLNG and Agip pipelines by suspected vandals to spite surveillance contractors
10.	Ayamakede, Andoni LGA	March, 2021	Between aggrieved youths and pipeline surveillance contractors over matters of negligence and insensitivity.
11.	Ugamakede, Andoni LGA	March, 2021	Between aggrieved youths and pipeline surveillance contractors over matters of negligence and insensitivity.
12.	Ibaa, Emohua LGA	June, 2021	Joint operations involving the military and surveillance contractors and suspected pipeline vandals.

Source: Compiled by Authors (September, 2021)

The Paradox of PSCs

The current approach to awarding the existing PSCs has created a seeming paradox such that where there are no surveillance contracts, there will be attacks on oil pipelines and where there are surveillance contracts, they often generate conflicts between beneficiaries and those left out in the contract-sharing formula. Presently, because of the decentralized approach of the PSCs which is neither based on merit nor performance, all category of groups and individuals ranging from ex-militant, vigilante, cult, gang groups, community-based organizations and chiefs, politicians, business people are jostling for these contracts. Accordingly, the PSCs have set the scene for a new wave of oil-related conflicts that have engulfed oil-bearing communities and fast spreading to the 23 local government areas of Rivers State and other oil-bearing States in the Niger Delta.

Since the existing PSCs are given to agitating groups and individuals with the ability to cause violence, other aspiring contractors who are left out in the surveillance contract-sharing have resorted to carry out violent actions on oil pipelines including sabotage and oil theft in Rivers State/Niger Delta region. While the violent actions by these non-beneficiaries of PSCs could be interpreted as a 'negotiating tool' to be recognized for the contracts, the beneficiaries are also fighting back to maintain their privileged position.

This 'negotiating tool' scheme by armed groups to attack oil pipelines/installations for recognition has been the underlying factor for the on-going intense and complex conflicts between and among rival groups over the control of the lucrative oil pipeline contracts in oil producing states like Rivers State. Even community-based grassroots organizations like the Host Communities of Nigeria – Producing Oil and Gas (HOSCON) have been known to have the backing of armed groups like the Reformed Niger Delta Avengers().

This scheme of violent attacks tends to be employed by armed groups, organizations and individuals seeking to grab the PSCs because of its tested precedents. Before 2009, it was the attacks on oil pipelines/installations by militants that led to the federal government amnesty and as a follow-up, actually initiated the PSCs. In 2015, when President Buhari took over power and suddenly stopped the PSCs, the same scheme of attacks on oil pipelines/installations for recognition was adopted by those affected, particularly the ex-militant leaders. Shortly afterwards, President Buhari was compelled to resume the PSCs to forestall the attacks on oil facilities and associated crimes. Essentially, the new approach of decentralizing or splitting these contracts to several smaller private security firms has compounded the situation. With the prospect of grabbing the contract by the numerous aspiring firms/groups and individuals, the use of attacks on oil pipelines for recognition has led to general insecurity in Rivers State.

However, after several years of implementing the PSCs involving millions of dollars, the nation has witnessed progressively increasing pipeline vandalism and oil theft (Ebiri and Jeremiah, 2019), and new waves of conflicts in oil bearing communities over the control of pipelines in host communities. According to Njoku *et al* (2020), the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC) reported that 8,353 pipeline sabotage cases were recorded between January, 2015 and June, 2019, while 1,067 pipelines were damaged between June, 2019 and June, 2020 making a total of 9,420 pipeline damaged cases in five years. Also, regardless of existing multi-million-dollar PSCs to private security firms the nation recorded about 23 million barrels of crude oil loss between January and June, 2019. Apart from the huge cost of the PSCs and the colossal loss of crude oil through oil theft, the NNPC also reported huge pipeline maintenance cost.

In Rivers State, the National Oil Spill Detection and Response Agency (NOSDRA) of Nigeria reported that there were 219 incidences of pipeline sabotage in the State in 2019 alone with resultant human deaths (mainly of perpetrators) and damage to the environment. According to NOSDRA, this figure shows an increase in pipeline sabotage and oil theft when compared to the cases recorded in 2018. Worried by the increase and dimension of cases in 2019, NOSDRA called for concerted public orientation on the dangers of illegal pipeline ruptures and its destructive effects on the environment (The News Nigeria, 2020).

In view of the growing complexity of the pipeline conflicts across the region, there are increasing calls by some non-arm bearing groups/bodies and other concerned stakeholders to terminate the existing PSCs to private security firms and other businessmen/ex-militant commanders and adopt a community-based pipeline surveillance. One body that is championing this paradigm shift is the Host Communities of Nigeria (HOSCON) representing the oil-bearing communities in the country. In anticipation of promising FGN pronouncements, the body has since recruited and trained about 10,000 community youths in readiness for government recognition (SDN, 2019).

Conclusion

The central argument of the article is that the award of over-valued and highly lucrative pipeline surveillance contracts (PSCs) to ex-militants have ensued both intra- and inter 'cult' struggles among ex-militants (between beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries) and other interested parties and individuals in Rivers State. These on-going armed struggles over the control of oil pipelines have undermined government security agencies and caused general insecurity in the State. Derived from the analysis above, two major conclusions reached are that: the non-involvement of local (host) communities in the oil industry necessitated the current system of awarding surveillance contracts to ex-militants and violence businesspeople; and, the new wave of power tussles over pipeline surveillance is rooted in the history of oil-related conflicts in Rivers State/Niger Delta.

Recommendations

In view of the complex violent conflicts generated by the existing pipeline surveillance contracts (PSCs) in Rivers State and other oil-bearing communities, the following recommendations are made to help contain the on-going conflicts/insecurity in the State and bring succor to host and impacted communities.

First, the Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN) and the Transnational Oil Corporations (TOCs) should take necessary steps to effectively involve local communities in pipeline surveillance. At least 45 % of the PSCs should be given to host and impacted communities while the remaining 55% should be awarded only to professionally competent firms.

Second and related to the above, the FGN should set up a standing 'Community-Security Consultative Committee' that will include government agencies, the TOCs, the local communities, the Media, relevant professional bodies and non-governmental organizations in each of the oil bearing States of Niger Delta.

Third, the FGN and the TOCs should undertake regular integrity assessments of the conditions of pipelines and ensure that ageing and corroding pipes are promptly maintained or replaced. It is noted that new pipelines are usually more difficult to damage than old rusting pipes which have also been affected by the harsh oil producing environment.

Finally, there is also the need to design an appropriate orientation or re-orientation and skills acquisition programmes for host and impacted communities in Rivers State.

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