

ETHNIC NATIONALISM AND MILITIAS IN NIGERIA



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Abstract

This paper examines the rising phenomenon of armed ethnic militias in Nigeria. In recent times several armed ethnic militias groups have mushroomed to defend the interest of their various ethnic groups in the country. In the last decade, the Niger Delta region has experienced an upsurge of these groups, who resorted to the use of violence and extreme militancy against oil companies, other ethnic groups and the Nigeria state. These agitations are always accompanied by violence, which has threatened the objective of peaceful co-existence and has destabilized the socio-economic development of the country. The restoration of democratic rule in 1999 heralded the emergence and proliferation of various armed ethnic militias groups. However, these groups are more pronounced in the Niger delta region of Nigeria, where the country's economic mainstay, crude oil and gas are mined. The inequitable resources distribution from the proceeds of crude oil and gas by the Nigeria state has thrown up these ethnic militias groups in the region. This paper looks at their emergence, purpose and the implication of their activities in the Niger Delta region and the larger Nigeria state.

Keywords: Ethnic Militias, Nationalism, Oil Wealth, Militancy and Conflict

Background to the Study

A corpus of research literatures have been written by scholars, opinion leaders, stakeholders, etc to underscore the correlation between the proliferation of armed ethnic militias groups and the unequal distribution of wealth from the proceeds of crude oil, gas and environmental degradation engendered by the exploitation of crude oil and gas in the Niger Delta. From the mid 1990s, the Niger Delta region of Nigeria has been experiencing an upsurge in the activities of the militia groups, which has led to a corresponding upsurge in violence conflicts, leading to destruction of property and loss of lives. The conflicts in the region centre on demand for adequate benefit from crude oil exploitation, compensation for damaged environment as a result of oil spills.

Decades of oil exploitation, environmental degradation and official state neglect have created an impoverished, marginalized and exploited citizenry, alongside the state and federal governments' inability to provide the basic and necessary infrastructural amenities and the enabling

environment needed to ease the unwarranted environmental and human degradations, disillusionment, anger, rural decay and high crime rate prevailing in the region . Therefore, the Niger Delta region is today a region of intense ethnic crisis, hostilities, violent confrontation and criminal violence, in the guise of kidnapping, piracy, armed robbery, illegal bunkering, cultism, etc. Among the most prominent and active ethnic militia groups in the region are the Egbesu Boys of Africa (EBA), the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP), The Chicoco Movement, The Ijaw Youth Council (IYC), Federated Niger Delta Ijaw Communities, Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force (NDPVF), Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), The Meinbutus, Arugbo Freedom Fighters, Jenekpo, Niger Delta Coastal Guerillas, Adaka Marines, and Matyrs Brigade. It will be recalled that the region experienced full blown insurgency from 2005 (watts2007); and by 2009, the country's economy and security were at great risk. Armed militia groups protesting against the Nigerian state and Transnational Oil Companies (TOC) for deprivation, engaged security forces in armed confrontation, attacked oil production infrastructure and took oil workers as hostages.

The disruptions to oil production and insecurity engendered by these actions drastically reduced the country's oil production output significantly from 2.6 million barrels per day in June 2005 to 1.3 million barrels per day in June 2009 (Ibaba and Arugu, 2013). Highlighting the place of the oil industry in the upsurge of armed militia groups in the Niger Delta, Femi Olokesusi (cited in Ibaba, 2005), observes that: In Nigeria, the petroleum industry has for long been plagued by these conflicts these conflicts centre around widespread environment degradation attributable to petroleum activities: human displacement, inadequate compensation for losses imposed on the community inadequate community it level involvement in project planning leading to alienation between the local population on the one hand and the oil companies and the state on the other.

Similarly, Johnson Nna (2001) notes that: The dominant force of crisis in the Niger Delta relates to the conflicts between communities and the oil companies, communities and the state, inter-communities conflict all or almost all of those derive from oil and its related activities. Equally, the World Bank supports this view when it noted in a 1995 Reports: Conflicts between stakeholders over resource rights and uses are endemic in the region. The most frequent and serious conflicts have pitted local community against oil companies.

The ethnic militias masterminded conflicts can be analyzed from different modes and types: Intra-community, inter-community, community-oil, inter-ethnic, and community-state, kidnapping, cultism, piracy, armed robbery, etc. The impact of these conflicts on the society has taken varied dimensions; displacements and associated refuges problems; destruction of settlements, property, and lives; insecurity etc. (Ibaba, 2005). Writing further on the conflicts and the activities of ethnic militia groups threatening peace and destruction of property and loss of

live, (Johnson Nna, 2001) observes that: In May 1997, the oil producing Ijaw and Itsekiri communities around the Warri axis went to war over the sitting of a Local Government Headquarters. It led to the destruction of lives and properties worth million of Naira and the destruction of oil activities in June 1998, youths in Town Brass, in the Brass Local Government Area of Bayelsa State, vandalized property of the Nigerian Agip oil company and completely destroyed the Local Government Secretariat as well as the personal property of the Chairman of the Local Government Council.

Cases are abound of communities attacked and sacked by neighbouring ones, spearheaded by armed ethnic militias.

(Inter-ethnic). Examples include the destruction of Ewoama community by Okpoma, the destruction of Beletiana by armed ethnic militia group from Liama, in Bayelsa State in the 1990s. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2006) noted in the case of Beletiana that although the community was destroyed in the 1990s, the destruction was so intense that by 2005, "it was difficult to imagine that a town of several thousand people once existed there" We would like to bring into focus wars between Andoni and Ogoni, Ogoni and Okirika, Eleme and Okirika in Rivers state in 1990s, where thousands of people were consumed and property destroyed. There have been horrifying inter/intra communal conflicts between groups such as the Ijaws and Itsekiri, Ijaw and Ilaje, Urhobo and Itsekiri, between communities such as Basambiri and Ogbologbomebiri in Bayelsa State and within community. The case of peremabiri in Bayelsa State is a case in point, where the whole community was reduced to rubble as a result of "oil politics" by youths and leaders of the community.

These conflicts, particularly inter-community ones led to the creation of youth-based community vigilantes who acted as "community army" and charged with the responsibility of warding off attacks by enemy communities. These vigilantes were armed and the exposure to violence which came with it partly laid the foundation for aggressive behavior, use of violence for conflict resolution, and emergence of armed groups that metamorphosed into cult, piracy, armed robbery and militia groups (Joab-peterside, 2005) Community vigilantes are also noted to have constituted themselves as community factions, who challenged community leadership and triggered violent conflicts, (Ibaba, and Arugu, 2013). This is the case of Peremabiri in Southern Ijaw Local Government area of Bayelsa. These are often motivated by perceptions (real or imagined) on acts of impropriety or by the struggle for access to community leadership as a means of having access to community funds and privileges or perks of office. Death and destruction of properties which accompanied these conflicts have created hatred and pitched people/communities against each other, setting the stage for revenge as a motivating factor to join armed groups such as cults and militias. Community-oil company conflicts masterminded by ethnic militias date to the 1970s, but became more pronounced in the 1990s. This manifest as

litigations over destructions of properties and payment of compensation peaceful/violent community protests/demonstrations, occupation and blockage of oil productions facilities and sites, sabotage of oil production pipelines and other equipment, and hostage-taking of TOC expatriate and local personnel. Okoko (1998) identified over 80 causes of conflicts between the TOC and OPCS with four demands: employment, social amenities, equitable distribution of community assistance/development projects and adequate compensation for properties destroyed by oil production activities as the most frequent causes of conflict.

Violence associated with community- Oil Company conflicts has led to the destruction of communities, deaths and destruction of properties. One of the widely reported cases was that of Umuechem in Rivers state in 1990, which resulted in the death of 20 villagers and the destruction of 495 houses. The police were invited by the Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC) to intervene in the protest by the community which was agitating for environmental protection, security of their means of livelihood and provision of basic social amenities (Alapiki, 2001). Besides, community-state conflicts in the Niger Delta were extension of community oil company conflicts. The attacks on the TOCs who are into joint venture business in the oil industries with the Nigerian government meant that government interests were under attack. The disruptions in oil production did not only affect revenues accruing to the TOCS alone, but also the government. The Nigeria government initial contact with conflict was the use of security forces to intervene in community- oil company conflicts. But this took a more serious dimension as the conflict escalated. The significant difference of this phase of conflict was the change in demands. Unlike the community -oil company conflicts which were a direct engagement between the OPCs and the TOCs, the community -state conflict was between ethnic/pan-ethnic civil society organizations and youth groups who developed charters and resolutions that made political demands on the Nigerian State. The Alaka Declaration, Bill of Rights of the Oron people, Ogoni Bill of Rights, Resolutions of the first Urhobo Economic summit, the Warri Accord and Kaima Declaration (Ibaba and Arugu, 2013) demanded political restructuring to guarantee the practice of true feudalism, self determination/autonomy and resource ownership and control by the federating states in the country.

These demands became the rallying point of mobilization, which fed into conditions of violence created by other forms of conflicts such as intra-community, inter-community and inter-ethnic conflicts. These conflicts have exposed people, particularly youths to violent gangsterism, cultism, piracy and mercenary groups become a common place. The communities are awashed with light and small weapons, as even community factions and communities engaged in conflict, stockpiled arms in self defense. Thus the militarization of the region which followed the political agitations and demands, and attacks on protesters and communities by security forces easily elicited armed response from the ethnic militias. According to Ibaba and Arugu (2013), the

ethno-nationalistic mobilization which accompanied the violent response of the Nigerian security forces triggered the formation of militia groups which drew their membership from the existing armed groups. It is said that the ability of the militia groups to fund their activities through oil theft/illegal oil bunkering, and their possession of sophisticated weapons which enabled them to directly confront the security forces created fertile conditions for the insurgency which lasted between 2005 to 2009 (Watts, 2007, Oseghae, Ikelegbe, Olarinmoye & Okhomina, 2007). The study explores the emergence of armed ethnic militias, the violence and criminality that accompanied their activities and the implication of their activities on the Nigerian state. It indicates that ethnic nationalism fervor that initially informed their emergence has now disappeared. They are now motivated by materialism (self-interest) and have turned the whole region into the Hobbesan state of nature, where armed robbery, kidnapping, piracy, oil theft, illegal bunkering, pipeline vandalism, etc have taken the centre stage.

Literature Review/Theoretical Framework

Various perspectives have been suggested in the literatures on the causes of the emergence of ethnic militia groups, context and the intensity of their activities. However, three main thoughts will be incisive here. They are the group deprivation, ethnic nationalism and ethnic regionalism. Although these theoretical orientations are linked, the relative deprivation approach seems to be most applicable and will be adopted here for the analysis of armed ethnic militia activities in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria (Okumagba, Okereke and Princewill, 2012). Adebisi (2008), posited that persisting gaps and inequalities between minority and majority groups created increasing tension between the groups, born out of frustration aggression nexus. Ethnic militia activities revolve around the distribution of national resources and the struggle for power, authority and values. In the face of real or perceived marginalization, ethnicity is viewed as instrumental, forming an effective platform around which youths sharing common ancestral view can mobilize support for civil struggles against socio-economic deprivation.

The arguments for the emergence and activities of the militia groups therefore is that their realization over the years, that more civil means will take more time to yield expected dividends. Thus the deprivation in the Niger Delta is the remote cause of emergence of armed ethnic militia groups in the Niger Delta region. When a man is denied of every good thing of life, he gets angry with himself, his neighbor, and even objects around him. This may best explain the situation in the Niger Delta area (Okumagba, Okereke and Princewill, 2012).

We can also explain the activities of armed ethnic militia group through frustration. Aggression Hypothesis This hypothesis posits that people are pushed into aggressive behavior influenced by frustration generated by the existence of oil in the region and the feeling of exploitation and marginalization in the Niger Delta region by the Nigerian State. Thus as a study of the "Egbesu"

Briggs (2004) Observed: the sudden growth of ethnic militias in Nigeria is born out of cumulative frustrations which metamorphosed into anger and aggression. The analysis of frustration aggression theory is a perfect description of the actions of ethnic militias in Nigeria including those in the Niger Delta.

Frustration leads to some form of aggression. This may not take in all situations since the level of tolerance differs from one group to another. Apparently, the awareness that state resources are misapplied to the utter benefit of the dominant ethnic groups, that the environmental impacts of the oil industry endanger their continued existence and that the condition vitiates their hope and vision for a better life. These have set in frustration and created a deep seated and pent-up anger which provide a fertile ground for armed ethnic militia groups to fester. Basic psychology teaches that frustration creates worry, which in turn leads to anger and ultimately violence. As a consequence, therefore, the activities of militia groups are directed at government, oil installations, their ethnic groups, their neighbours and other ethnic groups. (Hewstone, Miles, Stroebe and Wolfgang, 2001).

Violence and Criminality of Ethnic Militia Groups in the Niger Delta

The mind bugging question that has stared social scientists, stakeholders, opinion leaders, and policy makers is whether the ethnic militias are motivated by genuine concern to redress the wrong of the past. A critical analysis of the antics of the ethnic militias in the Niger Delta area indicates the contrary. Available records indicate that the people agitation for equitable distribution of proceeds from oil wealth has been rather hijacked by some criminal elements operating under the guise of liberation, thereby derailing the course of the struggle and making life unbearable for the people they are supposed to fight for. From the initial nationalistic fervor of defending the interest of the Niger Delta, the ethnic militias have turned against their own people. Studies are abound of their involvement in the numerous cases of kidnapping, oil theft, illegal bunkering, pipeline vandalism, piracy, armed robbery, cultism, etc. Therefore, a greater challenge facing the Nigerian state and the Niger Delta region lies in shifting the real agitation for a fair deal by the Niger Delta from bare face criminality. As it appears now, the borderline between genuine agitation and criminality can hardly be discerned.

In Bayelsa, Rivers and Delta (the core Niger Delta states), armed ethnic militia groups who virtually have no business with peace agitation for resource control are on the loose, terrorizing innocent Nigerians and expatriates. Some were actually agitators but later deviated and turned to kidnapping, armed robbery and piracy as a business. In Bayelsa, Rivers and Delta states, they have turned their camps as bases to keep their hostages. The object of such criminal gangs and genuine agitators are brutish and narcissistic and has certainly stained and diluted the genuine struggle of the people. It can be described as the rule of anarchy. More worrisome is the fact that even among

the “genuine” ethnic militias, some elements marauding the creeks and Rivers of the Niger Delta actively engage in kidnapping, piracy, armed robbery, extortion, etc because of the huge financial reward accruing from them. Consequently, the region is infested with the virus of criminality, anarchy, fear, cultism and terrorism unprecedented in the history of the Niger Delta Region

As a result, the character of the struggle is rather confusing to any critical mind, because the genuine agitation has been infuriated and effectively doused by what we can best termed as violent and criminal tendency. Thus distinguishing between genuine community agitations and barefaced criminal activity is rather hazy. Olumati (2008) has further added that criminals have changed their “product line”. According to him, this is manifested in the reduction of armed robbery in the area. He stated that it is not because the people are poor and/ or that armed robbers have repented and remorseful. Rather they have found greener pastures in the name of hostage taking, which is far more “lucrative” and less “risky” than armed robbery. Therefore they hide under the cloak of agitation of the Niger delta people to perpetrate heinous crime against their people and foreigners.

Victims are kept in dehumanizing and humiliating conditions. Some are kept in the forest and uncompleted building without food and water for days even weeks pending the duration of the negotiation. Some are tortured and chained to trees. Such is the condition victims are subjected to by their so called “liberators” who have turned around to hunt them down. Also piracy which was hitherto unknown surfaced in the area was led by ethnic militias. They introduced piracy, killing and robbing innocent travelers of their valuables, thereby making travelling on rivers and creeks a dangerous venture. Presently, the flashpoints for piracy are Nembe creek, some areas in southern Ijaw local government area in Bayelsa State, Kula and Bele, creeks in Rivers State, etc. It will be recalled that kidnapping began in 2005. It started when the movement for the Emancipation of Niger Delta (MEND) kidnapped nine expatriates' oil workers to demand for the release of the detained Muja hid Asari Dokubo, the leader of the Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force (NDPVF). The objective was purely political, to draw the attention of the western government and the world media to the situation in the Niger Delta.

When they kidnapped these foreigners, they exploited the blaze' of publicity generated to publicized their grievances and made demands on the Nigerian government. They did not ask for ransom. The state of insecurity generated by ethnic militias in the guise of fighting for unjust distribution of wealth from crude oil and gas has turned the region into the Hobbesian state of nature where man is an enemy unto man. Hobbes cited in (Ibaba, 2005) remarked that: In such condition, there is no place for industries; because the fruit thereof is uncertain; and consequently no culture of the earth no commodious building no knowledge of the earth, and which is worst of all, continues fear and danger of violent death.

The above clearly suggest that the activities of ethnic militias have impeded the development of the region. Another area worth attention is the level of environmental degradation brought about by ethnic militias in the region. When the struggle for the liberation of the region began, one of the main grievances against the oil companies and the federal government was the devastation of the environment by the activities of oil companies.

Paradoxically, these “advocates” are now leading in the destruction of the very environment they professed to protect. It's on record (supported by studies) that the rise of ethnic militias heralded the beginning of oil theft, pipeline vandalizing, illegal bunkering, illegal refineries, etc. The spills from their activities have polluted and burned large swathes of land in the area. It was from the huge money they realized, that they were able to acquire weapons to confront the Nigerian State. But their activities have devastated the environment, destroying marine life, farmland, economic, trees, etc; far worse than what the oil companies did in the past 50 years. Consequently the activities of ethnic militias besides creating state of high insecurity has deepened poverty in the region, because people can no longer engage in their legitimate pursuit of fishing and farming.

The Socio-Economic and Security Implication of Ethnic Militia Groups

Ethnic militia activities in the Niger Delta region involve kidnapping, killing of expatriate and non-expatriate staff, vandalism of oil installations, illegal refining of crude oil, oil theft, illegal bunkering, armed robbery, extortion, and other organized crimes. These unwholesome activities are negation of what freedom fighters should stand for, and the increased wave of their unwholesome activities have not only become a frequent routine but also assumed a worrisome dimension and is undermining economic development of the region. The question that often comes to the mind is that, why are they involved in organized crime and violent attacks on lives and property? The activities of these groups have led to the colossal loss of both human and material resources, with devastating impact on the economy and the local environment

Akinyele (2001) attempts a graphic analysis of the activities of ethnic militia group and posits that. Although the philosophy of their fight is Clear and comfortable, the concomitant and native effect of their action add less to the already dwindling economy of the region. The increasing level of oil theft and pipeline vandalizing by ethnic militia has crippled the national economy with the result that Nigeria could not meet its OPEC production quota of 2.5m bpd. According to the latest figures from the CBN, Nigerian crude oil output averaged just 1.9m bdp in 2013 as a result of industrial scale theft of crude oil and pipeline vandalizing in the Niger Delta (African Business, 2014). Besides, the African Development Bank stated that insecurity and oil theft in the Niger Delta is dampening Nigeria economic outlook. Consequently, local, state and federal governments are finding it increasingly difficult to meet their financial commitments.

Also, as a result of the increasing wave of oil theft and insecurity masterminded by ethnic militias in the region, major oil companies are divesting and pulling out of the region. For instance Shell Petroleum Development Company early this year divested and sold some oil blocks in the Nembe creek (Bayelsa State), citing increasing rate of oil theft, insecurity and pipeline vandalization in the area as the cause. Thus further investments have stalled. This is adversely affecting the upstream sector of the oil industry. In addition the proliferation of ethnic militias in the region from the 1990s has also led to increasing bitter inter and intra-ethnic wars, intra, and inter community disputes, leading to loss of lives and property. These conflicts are instigated by ethnic militias; they have further polarized the people of the Niger Delta, often resulting in fratricidal warfare.

Insecurity instigated by ethnic militias has adversely affected business development in the area. According to Bill Harry, president of Port Harcourt Chamber of Commerce, Industry, Mines and Agriculture (PHCCIMA), militancy, violence and hostage taking have created an awesome level of fear. He noted that their members are suffering because they are not doing business. He further stated that about 10,000 jobs have been lost as a result (Onimajesin, 2005). The MOSOP uprising in the early 1990s led to the murder of four prominent Ogoni sons in 1994, which eventually resulted in the hanging of eight Ogoni activists in 1995 by the federal government. This inferno destabilized the whole Ogoniland, with thousands of people consumed and displaced in the process, and a lot fleeing the country. Till date, the federal government and oil companies have not recovered from the incident. Shell and Chevron have not been allowed by the people to exploit crude oil and gas in the area; with far reaching negative consequence on the people, and the nation's economy.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The paper investigated the emergence of ethnic militias and their implications on the socio-economic development of the country. It also focused on the negative activities of ethnic militias in the Niger Delta, who are enmeshed in organized crimes; oil theft, pipelines vandalization, kidnapping, armed robbery, piracy, violence, etc, which have crippled the nation's economy and degraded the environment. Based on the finding, we recommend the followings.

1. Local, state and federal governments should accelerate infrastructural development in the region. The dearth of social and physical infrastructure in the Niger Delta is a binding constrain to the sustainable development of the region. Most rural areas lack access to motor able roads, hospitals, schools and communication network; these are an impediment against sustainable livelihood. Lack of functional infrastructure makes the people to rebel against the government.
2. Adopt a more equitable derivation formula. Perhaps one of the most troubling issues in the Niger Delta is the 13 percent derivation that is allocated to the oil producing state from

- the federation account. Many see this as an injustice, which should be raised to 20 percent.
3. The federal government should quickly checkmate the activities of the ethnic militia groups because their activities have exceeded the limits imposed by societal consensus.
 4. The federal government should also upscale the battle against organized crimes such as kidnapping, armed robbery, piracy, oil theft, pipeline vandalism, illegal refining of crude oil, illegal bunkering, etc in the region.

As the discourse revealed, the fundamental issues that gave rise to ethnic militia activities in the Niger Delta include the ownership and control of oil resources, the management and the allocation of oil revenues, the environmental impacts of exploration and production, landholding and compensation issues as well as lack of access to justice which maybe surmised as public participation in the oil industry (AKO, 2013) Addressing these issues is central to achieving and sustaining peace in the Niger Delta.

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