

# Oath Taking as an Effective Tool for Peacebuilding and Conflict Resolution: A Case Study of Andoni Local Government Area of Rivers State, Nigeria

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## Abstract

Andoni is one of the twenty-three Local Government Areas in Rivers State, Nigeria, with its headquarters at Ngo Town. Andoni Local Government Area (LGA) of Rivers State has been a flashpoint for cult activities. The mainland of the LGA is plague-ridden with cultism and hooliganism. No day passes without blood flows in Andoni. Most of the communities in the LGA have been abandoned due to unrelenting killings, kidnapping and sea piracy. Recently armed militants with army uniform invaded Oyorokoto community and unleashed mayhem on the people of the area. During the raid, no fewer than 3000 houses in Oyorokoto community were burnt. The armed gangs also burnt down the palace of the paramount ruler and destroyed fishing equipment worth more than two billion Naira (N2bn). Few weeks before this incident, no fewer than ten (10) persons were reportedly killed in the LGA as dreaded cultists disrupted a burial ceremony. Concerned and worried by these unending killings and mayhem in the area, the newly elected Chairman of the Council in consultation with the Council of Traditional Rulers vowed to end all cults related killings and crimes in the area. The Chairman then commenced the process of consultations with all relevant stakeholders in the area with a view to ending all cult related activities in the area within the shortest possible time. This led to the granting of amnesty to the different rival cult groups in the area. The youths underwent a 3-day reorientation programme to change their mindset from violent behaviour and criminal intentions in order to reintegrating them to the society and making them useful to themselves. Following the granting of amnesty to the rival cult groups, the Andoni Traditional Rulers Council in collaboration with the Local Government Council organized an Oath Taking Ritual/Ceremony for the repentant cultists. On the day of the ceremony which took place in October 2021, the repentant cultists took turns to swear to the deity of Andoni land - York-Obolo, promising never to indulge in any form of hostility and criminality or any act capable of undermining and truncating the prevailing peace in Andoni. At the end of the traditional oath of peace ceremony in Agwut-Obolo, the Traditional Seat of Andoni, the Andoni Council Chairman, Barrister Erastus Charles Awortu, said the ceremony was the climax of sustained efforts by the traditional rulers and his administration to address the root causes of insecurity in Andoni and restore an enduring peace in the area. He noted that the traditional oath of peace was to formalise the commitment to peace by the repentant cultists, while expressing optimism that Andoni would not be known for violence anymore. Also, the Chairman of Andoni Traditional Rulers Council and Okaan-Ama Ngo, King Okruket Nnabiget, who led other traditional rulers to witness the oath taking by the repentant cultists, expressed joy at the return of peace to Andoni, noting that they were at Agwut-Obolo the traditional seat of Andoni people to see the final end of the oath taking of our sons who engaged themselves in cultism, the group leaders are here, they have already taken the oath, we are here as committee handling the peace initiative to administer and supervise the oath taking process and this is the final stage. The King stressed that he was personally very happy because finally peace has returned to Andoni now, to God be the glory. Thus, oath taking is considered as a veritable tool for peacebuilding and conflict resolution in most parts of Nigeria as seen in the case of Andoni.

## **Background to the Study**

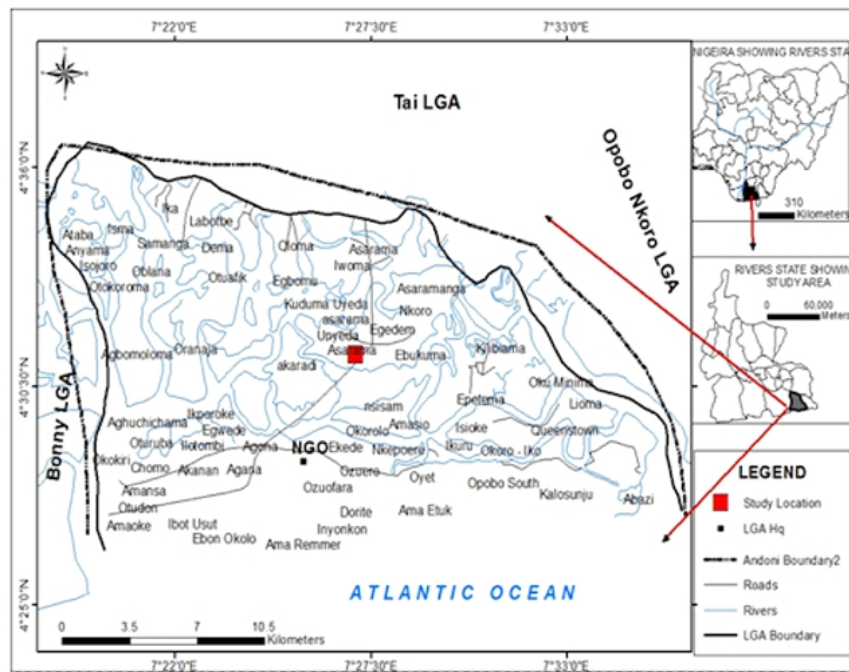
### **The People of Andoni**

Situated in the present-day Rivers and Akwa Ibom state, the Adoni people are a part of the Ijaw tribe and known to be related to the Annang, Ibibio and Efik people of Akwa Ibom State and Cross River State in Nigeria. According to some historians, evidence of traditional history shows that the Andoni are descended from Ayama the son of Tara (Tarakiri) who was left with Kala-Okun at Igbedi creek. And the migrating ancestors are mentioned as Asara or Asa founder of Asarama, Ifop, Edeh or Edabiri, Alama and Abah to name a few. It is said that they left the Igbedi creek area at an early stage taking with them the title "Indo Oru" which they remembered and gave to their priest-rulers. The title "Indo Oru" was later corrupted to "Ando Oru", while during their sojourn "NI" was added to give the term "Andoni Oru". Still, in the spirit of exodus, it is believed that the early ancestors left the central delta and made their way through creeks and swamps felling trees to cross the waterways; camping for in the southeastern region for some time before moving into the delta. Oral tradition has it that they called their first settlement "Ayama" after their ancestor. It is said that they settled there for centuries manufacturing salt for the interior markets before moving. However, it is important to state here that prior to the colonial era, the Andoni people had commercial contacts with European traders and with other Ijaw clans, such as the Bonny, Okrika, Kalabari, and Nkoro. And although history has refused to tell us why, the Andoni people frequently fought wars with the Kingdom of Bonny, as well with the Ogonis. Known for their deep cultural lifestyle, the Adonis are believed by some to be the fiercest warriors in the Niger Delta.

### **Language**

Owing to the complete loss of their Defaka Ijaw dialect, the Andoni people now speak Obolo as the only native language. And Obolo is a language that combines Efik, Ibibio, Oron, and Ijaw dialects based on the original Ijaw intonation and Efik-Ibibio lexicon. They, however, refer to God in their language as Awaji or Owaji.

## Location



**Figure 1:** Map of Andoni Local Government Area of Rivers State

The people of Andoni are situated in the present-day Rivers and Akwa Ibom state. They not only seen as peoples of the creek, they can also be deemed as Islanders because their villages and towns are situated on islands. Thus, Island I comprise Ngo Town, Akaradi province Ikuru Town, Unyeangala, Asukama, Agana, Egwede, Ayamboko Town Agwut-Obolo, Ilotombi, Ekede and stretched to Oyorokoto, the largest fishing settlement in Rivers State. Island II comprise Asarama Town, Unyeada, Egendem and other small villages and Island III has Ebukuma Town, Okoloile, Agbalek-Ama (Agbalama), Ama Ubulom, Ama Ngere Nkpon, Otako, Okorobo-Ile, Down Below, Asuk-Oyet, Ama Esuuk, Ama jaba, and several other smaller villages. There is also a third Island which is believed to stand at the centre of Andoni as it is the link between Island One and Two. Island Four includes four major communities – Dema, Ibotirem, Samanga and Ajakajak, Dema being the largest. Also included among the towns of Andoni that are situated on Island are, Ataba Town and its many villages, Oron-Ijah, Egbomun, Ajakajak, Ibot-Irem, Isiodum, Iyon-Oron, Asarama-ija and many smaller fishing ports.

### **Andoni Local Government Area (L.G.A)**

Andoni local government area was created in the year 1991. Andoni is a Local Government Area in Rivers State, Nigeria. Its headquarters is at Ngo Town. It has an area of over 233 km<sup>2</sup> and a population of over 311,500 at the last census. The postal code of the area is 504. Andoni local government area is found in Rivers state, South-South Nigeria and has its headquarters in the town of Ngo. Several towns and villages make up Andoni LGA and these include Asarama, Okoroboile, Ngo, and Oron-okpon. Christianity and

traditional religion are the prominent religious affiliations in Andoni LGA while the area has an estimated population of 211,769 inhabitants with members of several tribes such as the Ogoni, Kalabari and the Ikwerre included among the area's dwellers. Important festivals held in Andoni LGA include the Okolondeng fishing festival, the Nwantam masquerade festival, and the Unyeada fishing festival.

### **Geography of Andoni**

The total area covered by Andoni LGA is 233 square kilometres with an average humidity of 90 percent. The average temperature of the area is 25 degrees centigrade with the landscape of the area featuring several rivers and tributaries.

### **Economy of Andoni**

Andoni LGA has substantial deposits of crude oil and natural gas and the activities of oil mining companies form the bulk of the economy of the area. Fishing and farming are other popular economic activities engaged in by the inhabitants of Andoni LGA.

### **Brief History**

The Andoni people of Rivers State, of Nigeria, are considered to be an Ijaw tribe by some, a distinct ethnolinguistic group by others, and a people closely related to the Annang, Igbo, Ibibio and Efik people of Akwa Ibom State and Cross River State in Nigeria. Like these people, the Andoni people refer to God as Awaji or Owaji. Historically, the Andoni (Idoni or Indo) is the first son among the many sons of Ijo (Ujo) heir to the throne of Oduduwa (Adumu) of Ile-Ife before the colonial era and had commercial contacts with European traders and with neighboring Ijaw clans, such as the Bonny, Okrika, Kalabari, and Nkoro. The Andoni frequently fought wars with the Kingdom of Bonny. The Andoni people speak Obolo as the only native language. Obolo language is a combination of words from Igbo, Efik, Ibibio, Annang, Okrika, Ijaw, and Nembe

There is a historical link between the Okrika and the Andoni people. The Andoni people are the fiercest warriors in the Niger Delta, they have fought many wars with the Ogonis yet they are the best of friends. The Andoni (Obolo) clan of Ijaw is very wide with Ohafia and Aro (Arochukwu) people in Igbo land, Eastern Obolo, Ibeno-Eket and Oron in Akwa Ibom states and Andoni, Kala-Ido and Ogoloma in Rivers State. The Andoni people are very cultural, among the key towns are Ngo (Gogo), Ebukuma, Ikuru (Ikwt), Ataba, Ekede, Agwut-Obolo, Okoromboko, Okoroete, Iko, (Eastern Obolo axis), Asarama, Unyeada, Dema and Ilotombi. The Nwantam masquerade of Andoni celebrated every first January is one of the highlights of Obolo festivities, which they share with the Opobo, Nkoro, Bonny and Ndoki Ijaws. Their ancient practices include a writing system known as nsibidi, ofiookpo cult and the war dance which both the Ohafia and Arochukwu clans still retain despite loss of original language. Some parts of the Andoni tribe can be reached by roads and all can be reached by sea. It is rich in Wildlife (Elephants, Monkeys, Species of Pythons, Tortoise etc. and Mineral resources. It is a growing tourist location in Rivers State.

Andoni villages and towns are situated on islands. Thus, Island one comprises Ngo Town, Ikuru Town, Unyeangala, Agana, Egwede, Ayamboko Town Agwut-Obolo, Ilotombi, Ekede and stretched to Oyorokoto, being the largest fishing settlement in Rivers State. Island Two comprise Asarama Town, Unyeada, Egendem and other small villages and Island Three has Ebukuma Town, Okoloile, Agbalek-Ama (Agbalama), Ama Ubulom, Ama Ngere Nkpon, Otako, Okorobo- Ile, Down Below, Asuk-Oyet, Ama Esuuk, Ama jaba, and several other smaller villages. In fact, it is believed that Island Three stands at the centre of Andoni as it is the link between Island One and Two. Island Four includes four major communities - Dema, Ibotirem, Samanga and Ajakajak, Dema being the largest. Across this stretch of land are parts of Ogoni. Other towns of Andoni that is situated on Island includes, Ataba Town and its many villages, Oron-Ijah, Egbomun, Ajakajak, Ibot-Irem, Isiodum, Iyon-Oron, Asarama-ija and many smaller fishing ports. Aerial view of these island displays a sort of shattered constillation on the surface of water.

### **Cultism and Cult Crises in Andoni**

Andoni Local Government Area has been the epicenter of cultism and cults rivalries and crises for so many years now resulting into hundreds of lives have been lost, properties worth billions of Naira destroyed, communities sacked with increasing numbers of refugees on a daily basis, with its attendant detrimental implications on the socio-economic well-being of the people. Andoni Local Government Area (LGA) of Rivers State has been a flashpoint for cult activities. The mainland of the LGA is plague-ridden with cultism and hooliganism and the communities known for criminal activities. No day passes without killing in Andoni. Most communities in the area have been deserted due to continuous killings, kidnapping and sea piracy.

In early April 2016 armed militants with army uniform stormed Oyorokoto community and unleashed mayhem on the people of the area. During the raid, the senseless militants who are sons of Andoni burnt no fewer than 3000 houses in the Oyorokoto community. The armed thieves also burnt down the palace of the paramount ruler and destroyed fishing equipment worth about Two Billion Naira (N2b). The cultists stationed permanently at Ngo, the Local Government headquarters. It was learnt that the renewed cult activities in the area was attributed to the non-challant attitude of the Caretaker Committee (CTC) Chairman of Andoni LGA. The CTC Boss was said to be self-centred, and non-performing. It was also revealed that the CTC chairman did not judiciously utilize the N10m security vote he is collecting every month. The CTC Chairman allegedly withdrawn every logistic support to the police and the Joint Military Task Force (JTF) stationed in the LGA, and diverted the huge security votes to his personal bank account. Thus, creating security lapses that allowed criminals armed with sophisticated weapons to mount security check points at Ngo waterfront. The CTC chairman lost grip of the administrative affairs of the LGA, making indigenes of the area to call for his sack.

Also, in April 2016, no fewer than ten (10) persons were reportedly killed in the LGA as dreaded cultists disrupted a burial ceremony. Rifles belonging to two mobile police escorts were seized by the cultists. These acts of hooliganism and lawlessness in the area

got to its peak when masked and unmasked armed gunmen boldly attacked the Nigeria police station at Ngo town. They opened fire on the policemen who were on duty. During the unwarranted attacks they carted away arms from the station which was confirmed by the Rivers State Police authority. In the second week of April 2017, over 12 persons were feared dead in Andoni Local Government Area, Rivers State in a renewed spectre of cult clashes involving Icelanders and members of Movement for the Emancipation of Niger Delta (MEND).

It was gathered that the clashes, which started in Ataba community with the killing of two brothers, spread to more communities in the area. Some of the communities affected were Asarama, Egbormung, Obiama, Oronija Ungenda, Isiodum and Oyorokoto. The affected communities were deserted by their inhabitants for fear of further invasion by the suspected cult groups. The Rivers State Police Command confirmed the attack and deployed a crack team to the troubled communities to check further attacks by the cultists. Indigenes of the affected communities complained bitterly that it was a taboo for an Andoni man to take the life of a fellow Andoni man, and called on both the traditional rulers and the political class in the area to do more to stem the rising cases of cult-related violence in the area.

On April 23, 2021 six persons were feared killed as gunmen suspected to be cultists invaded Dema and nearby communities in Andoni. The gunmen were said to have stormed the Andoni communities in about ten-speed boats, shooting sporadically and leaving four persons dead, even as some locals gave name of the invaders as Icelanders cult group. An eyewitness from the area said residents scampered to safety during the heavy shooting in some communities in the area. "This morning, we heard some gunshots. They were shooting at Ajakajak, Samanga, Ibute-Irem and Dema. People ran helter-skelter and there are no security personnel here. They came with about ten-speed boats loaded with arms and ammunition. "I am asking the government to come to our aid by sending security personnel. People are dying", he stated. Another resident who spoke on condition of anonymity said about four persons, two women and two young men have lost their lives "What we are recording now is four. Two women and two boys. They were not involved in any cult issue". Reacting to the Andoni attacks, spokesman for the state police command, said police operatives and men of the Nigerian Navy have been deployed to the area to restore normalcy. "We have been arresting them. We have recovered large cache of arms and ammunition. Two days ago, we had an encounter with them. The DPO led his team, we encountered them and got two of them fatally wounded and recovered some arms and ammunition. "They go after their targets. They don't go for innocent people as it were. So, it been cult rivalry, cult supremacy, clash and mindless killings of perceived opponents. "We are not relenting in any way. We are doing our best to ensure that they are tamed, contained and dealt with accordingly. "We will continue to do our best to ensure that Ogoni axis know peace. The CP has ordered that five team with patrol vehicles be deployed to that axis with a view to beefing up security and sanitizing that axis", he added.

On May 3, 2021, some traditional rulers in Andoni Local Government Area of Rivers State decried increasing insecurity in the local government, which has persisted for over three years. The concerned Traditional Rulers Chief and Elders Council narrated how over four hundred persons have lost their lives, about one hundred houses razed down and several residents of Andoni communities sacked from their homes within the period in question. Addressing newsmen in Andoni, the Paramount ruler of Atah-Obolo Community, His Eminence King Johnson Daniel-Owurong-Ekumumbuban who read out the position of his people, attributed the security challenges in the area to the installation of a King in the local government against the wishes of the people. The Paramount ruler of Atah-Obolo community noted that the said King was illegally installed by the political class and some other traditional rulers in Andoni. Daniel-Owurong-Ekumumbuban said “in the past few years, the security situation in Andoni has degenerated to a more despicable level. It is sad to know that while the situation continues to deteriorate in the past three years, our traditional institution and leaders forced on the people of Andoni by those who call themselves political class were busy nodding their heads and clapping their hands for the emerging monsters that has been sending our people to their early graves and making our ancient community to unfortunately go into extinction. The King lamented that as we speak, grasses have taken over and overgrown our homes which had either been vandalized, destroyed, looted or utterly burnt. For instance, in the Asarama community alone, over one hundred houses were burnt, destroyed and looted to the least pin between 2017 and today, not by any external aggression, but by criminals, cultists and militants from within the communities of Andoni.

The King further narrated how the palace of the King of Oyeada town King Otuo Isreal and over twenty other houses were burnt down in the community in 2017. He disclosed that almost all the houses in Egendem community in the Local Government were also vandalised, forcing over ninety percent of the residents to flee for safety. According to him the palace of late King of Ngo town was equally vandalized alongside about five other houses within the period in review. He also recalled how many people were killed in Ajagaja Samanja Iboteridema Otuafor axis and houses destroyed, leaving the community deserted due to cult activities. The kings and elders therefore called on the Rivers State Government to come to their aid and stop the causes of the increasing insecurity in their local government area.

Dennis Naku on May 13, 2021 reported that no fewer than two thousand persons have fled communities in the Andoni Local Government Area of Rivers State following clashes between rival cults in the area. Recall that two leaders of the Movement for the Emancipation of Niger Delta were recently killed during a reprisal by suspected cultists from the Icelanders group. A community leader, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said since the duo were killed, there had been constant invasion and attacks between the two groups, which had led to the death of many. He stated that people have been forced to become refugees in neighbouring Ogoni villages on account of the onslaught by gunmen who have overrun 10 villages and are still planning to attack more. He narrated that the attackers entered Ataba community, fired several warning shots and vandalised the

king's residence while acknowledging that the cultists sometimes waylay fishermen within Andoni territorial waters, giving orders as to where they will fish. The attacked communities are Obiama, Ajakajak, Samanga, Ibot-Irem, Dema, Otunria, Otuafu, Ogbonte, Egbomung, stressing that some women have not seen their children for the past one month since they ran from their villages. Over two thousand Andoni people are scattered in various communities in Ogoni as refugees and therefore exposed to hunger and unfavourable weather conditions. Meanwhile, the Peace and Reconciliation Committee in Andoni said it had commenced work on resolving the cult-related crises in the area. A member of the committee and President General, Obolo Youths Coalition, Ijonama Mkpon, pleaded with the people of the area to work with the panel and stakeholders in order to bring lasting peace to Andoni.

Town Crier Online newspaper reported that following the killing of a repentant cultist in the Andoni Local Government Area, Rivers State by an alleged OSPAC member, there are indications of a possible spat of crisis that has now enveloped across communities in the LGA as regard looming reprisal attack by others, particularly some members of the de cease cultist gang. Investigation by the *Town Crier Online* revealed that the once quiet LGA has been on fire in recent time, following several cases of cults and gangs' clashes including killings and other violence activities in that area of the state that have reportedly cost the lives of several persons from the area. Ata Awaji-Nombek was said to have been gun down by an unknown OSPAC local vigilante member, penultimate week, and this development has caused several uproars that may likely caused the peace of the once quiet and lovely LGA and against efforts canvassed by some peace-loving stakeholders from the area.

In a related development, Asphericnews an online newspaper equally reported that the people of Andoni Local Government Area in Rivers State have decried what they described as the silence and alleged ineptitude of the Federal and State Governments on the insecurity plaguing their area. A youth leader in the area and President General of Obolo Youth Coalition, IJON-AMA MKPON AMON condemned the silence by the Andoni political class whom he accused of doing nothing to fight the social problem. MKPON said this in an interview with newsmen in Port Harcourt while reacting to the killing of the Principal of Community Secondary School, Nkoro, Dr. PATRICIA OBOMANU. It would be recalled that OBOMANU was killed by a stray bullet during a crossfire between the Operation Sting operatives and gunmen on the Andoni-Opobo/Nkoro Unity Road. MKPON reminded the Andoni political class that the boys were after both the rich and the poor and pleaded with them to immediately intervene or allow more people become victims of the carnage that has befallen Andoni. The OYC President also maintained that the people of Andoni have been denied the security coverage that other people enjoy describing it as an act of injustice.

Meanwhile, it is more than a year since the security crisis rocking the Andoni Local Council has been in the news, despite the Local Government Area boasting of state and national political leaders. Some of these leaders include the National Chairman of the

Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), Prince UCHE SECONDUS former Rivers State Deputy Governor, TELE IKURU, and Speaker of the House of Assembly, IKUINYI-OWAJI IBANI. Other political stalwarts include the Rivers State pioneer Chairman of All Progressives Party (APC), Chief DAVIES IBIAMU IKANYA as well as first class traditional rulers in the state.

Operatives of the Rivers State Police Command have begun combing of creeks and forests in the state in search of a first-class traditional ruler, King Aaron Ikuru and a University Lecturer, Dr. Jones Ayauwo. Ikuru, who is the traditional ruler of Ikuru Town in Andoni Local Government Area of Rivers State and Ayauwo, who is a lecturer in the Department of Linguistics, University of Port Harcourt, were kidnapped. While the monarch was kidnapped in his residence in Ikuru Town, the lecturer was abducted along the Andoni-Bori Road while on his way to Port Harcourt, the state capital. Ayauwo, who also hails from Andoni Local Government Area, was returning from the Obolo Bible Translation meeting in company of three Port Harcourt-based journalists when he was kidnapped.

Speaking with newsmen in Port Harcourt after the incident, Police Public Relations Officer (PPRO) in the state, Nnamdi Omoni, said tactical teams of the Command have been deployed to affect the release of the duo. Omoni, who appealed to the public to increase security consciousness at all times, possibly to avoid late hour journey, gave an assurance that information will be made available as soon as more details are available to the command. The police have arrested one Wariboko Basoene in connection with the abduction of a traditional ruler in Rivers State. Mr Nnamdi Omoni, disclosed this in a statement issued in Port Harcourt while confirming the release of the monarch. The Okama of Ikuru in Andoni Local Government Area of the state, King Aaron Miller, was kidnapped from his hometown Ikuru on February 21, 2021 and taken to an unknown destination. The police, in the wake of the incident, deployed strategically and mounted unassailable pressure on the kidnappers. In one of such pressures, the King's clothes and hat were recovered at a creek, while one Wariboko Basoene was arrested, Omoni stated. He added that in the course of the investigation, the suspect who made useful confessions to the police finally led the operatives to a forest in Abissa, where the Monarch was eventually rescued. According to the command's spokesman, the monarch regained his freedom after spending five weeks in captivity. He noted that the release of the traditional ruler was as a result of a robust synergy between the police and the Nigerian Navy, adding that both agencies worked relentlessly and with the aid of technical assistance to record the feat.

Narrating his ordeal in the hands of his abductors, King Aaron Miller thanked God for his freedom and commended the Police and others who contributed directly or indirectly to his release. On his part, the Commissioner of Police in Rivers, Eboka Friday, who led his officers to the residence of the monarch had also thanked God for the release and commended his men for the success. He noted that on the assumption of duty, he was confronted with the dastardly incident but swiftly put adequate machinery in place to ensure the safe and unconditional release of the King and his kinsman (the lecturer) who

were kidnapped simultaneously. The Police Commissioner gave an assurance that the command would not be distracted by the achievements made but would continue to ensure the safety of the people and their properties.

### **Inauguration of New Executive Council in Andoni**

Following the successful conduct of Local Government elections in Rivers State in April 2021, a newly elected Chairman of Andoni Local Government Area, Hon. Erastus Awortu was sworn-in on June 17, 2021 by the Executive Governor of Rivers State, His Excellency Ezebonwo Nyesom Wike. Apparently dissatisfied and unhappy with the insecurity and cults related crimes that have pervaded the area, the new Chairman swung into action by consulting all relevant stakeholders including internally displaced people of Andoni.

Food items worth millions of Naira were donated to thousands of Internally Displaced Persons, IDPs, from 4 riverine communities in Andoni Local Government Area of Rivers State who were sacked from their homes due to clashes between cult gangs in their areas by the new chairman of the council. Awortu made the donation during a visit to the IDPs at Kaa Waterfront, a community in Khana Local Government Area where the people are taking refuge after they were displaced from their communities by the cult gangs. He also vowed that his administration would do whatever it takes within the ambit of the law to ensure that the displaced persons safely return to their homes within the next one week. Awortu assured the affected communities of adequate security and protection as security boats have been procured to effectively patrol the area and check the senseless acts of the rampaging cultists. He vowed that no community would be sacked in Andoni again as a result of civil disturbances under his watch as council chairman. He further called on the displaced persons and leaders of the affected communities not to cover up criminal acts in their domain regardless of who is involved as such cover-ups would have dire consequences. Some of the Internally Displaced Persons expressed delight that the Council Chairman was able to help them barely one week after assuming office. They lamented that the incessant cult clashes in their communities have left them homeless and in abject poverty. According to them, the cult clashes have resulted in wanton destruction of lives and properties, their source of livelihoods and the disruption of the education of their children.

Earlier, the Andoni Council Chairman Erastus Awortu in company of his counterpart in Khana Local Government Area, Dr. Thomas Bariere, paid a courtesy visit on the Paramount Ruler of Kaa Community in Council, King Theophilus Nwigo and the Leadership of the Community to show appreciation to them for providing shelter for the displaced persons. It would be recalled that several communities in Andoni had been sacked due to regular bloody cult clashes in communities in the area. The clashes led to the abduction King Aaron Ikuru of Ikuru Community and Chairman Andoni Council of Chiefs. He spent 55 days in the hands of kidnappers before he regained his freedom.

### **Oath Taking and Peace-building Efforts in Andoni**

Repentant Cultists in Andoni Local Government Area of Rivers State took part in a

Traditional Oath taking ceremony to keep the existing peace in the area. The Oath taking ceremony which held in October 2021 comprised of different rival Cult groups in the area who were granted amnesty by the Andoni Traditional Rulers Council in support of the Local Government Council took turn to swear to the deity of Andoni land known as York-Obolo, promising never to indulge in any form of hostility and criminality or any act capable of undermining and truncating the prevailing peace in Andoni. The moves came barely two months after the misguided youths underwent a 3-day reorientation programme to change their mindset from violent behaviour and criminal intentions with a view to reintegrating them back to the society and making them useful to themselves.

Speaking at the end of the Traditional Oath of Peace ceremony held in Agwut-Obolo, the Traditional Seat of Andoni, the Council Chairman, Hon. Erastus Charles Awortu said the ceremony was the climax of sustained efforts by the Traditional Rulers and his administration to address the root causes of insecurity in Andoni and restore an enduring peace in the area. He noted that the Traditional Oath of Peace was to formalize the commitment to peace by the repentant Cultists, while expressing optimism that Andoni would not be known for violence anymore.

In his words, "I am highly delighted that inspite of the odds and huddles that we faced, we have been able to get to this climax where we can now hope that we have respite. Since we made oral commitment to peace, we have seen that the place has calm down, this is just a way of formalizing it according to their belief and we believe we will have an enduring peace. Andoni will not be known for violence anymore. It is a thing of joy, honestly speaking" The Andoni Council Boss Erastus Awortu also said his administration is reaching out to companies operating within the Andoni territory to engage some of the repentant youths as part of their Corporate Social Responsibility and contribution towards the sustenance of the existing peace in Andoni. He hinted that some of the repentant Cultists will benefit from the Forest Reserves Initiative of his administration which aims at preserving Wildlife in Andoni Forest and harnessing its full potentials for the socioeconomic development of Andoni.

Awortu equally promised that his administration would explore other ways to engage more of the repentant cultists as well as other youths in meaningful ventures within the available limited resources of the Council stressing that if you see the number of people involved in this circle of violence, you know the number is huge, we will try to engage companies operating within the Andoni territory to see whether they will engage a few of them. On our part we will see how we can create sanitation jobs and engage them so that they can channel their energies to something more constructive and productive. He further stated that as you are aware very soon, we are going to pass the Bye-law restricting hunting and felling of trees in Andoni, and as a consequent of that we need Forest Guards, so we are going to engage some of them in that regard. We are also going to explore other areas within our limited resources to engage the former deviant youths as well as other youths to make life meaningful to them and to the society.

The Chairman of Andoni Traditional Rulers Council and Okaan-Ama Ngo, His Royal Majesty, King (Dr.) Okruketa Nnabiget (XIV) who led other Traditional Rulers to witness the Oath Taking by the repentant Cultists expressed joy at the return of peace to Andoni. He commented that today we are here in Agwut-Obolo the traditional seat of Andoni people to see the final end of the Oath taking of our Sons who engaged themselves in cultism, the group leaders are here, they have already taken the Oath, we are here as Committee handling the peace initiative to administer and supervise the Oath taking process and this is the final stage, noting that he is personally very happy because finally peace has returned to Andoni now, to God be the glory. The Monarch assured the repentant Cultists that they will not be left idle as he promised that the Andoni Traditional Rulers Council would work assiduously with the Local Government Chairman to secure Training and Employment opportunities for them in companies operating within the Andoni territory as well as other areas of job opportunities.

He affirmed that when he resumed office as Chairman of the Andoni Traditional Rulers Council by June 2021 and he promised that as far as he is concerned the repentant cultists will not be left idle if only they embrace peace. He promised to engage companies operating within the Andoni territory to secure training and employment opportunities for them to earn legitimate income to maintain themselves so that they will not return to cultism anymore. The King stated that he and members of the Traditional Rulers Council as well as the Local Government Chairman have promised to get them something doing so that they will not return to crime again.

In a related development, the Andoni Local Government Council Chairman, Erastus Charles Awortu while addressing the Andoni people at an event recently in Asarama cautioned Chiefs of the various communities in the local government to desist from creating confusion or engaging in acts inimical to the existing peace currently being enjoyed in Andoni. He said the advice followed the indictment of the Chiefs by some misguided youths during the renunciation and Oath taking ceremony against cultism in Andoni.

Awortu while attributing the restoration of peace in Andoni to God explained that the misguided youths insisted they will not take the Oath unless the Chiefs were made to do same. According to the Chairman, I have said this always that I don't even know what I did that everywhere is peaceful in Andoni today, so it is the work of God. The Chairman equally stressed that to our Chiefs, I say this advisedly because when we made some misguided youths to take part in renunciation and Oath taking against cultism in Andoni, they said they were not going to take the Oath unless the Chiefs are given the Oath. The only indication is that the Chiefs are behind the boys. I want to urge our Chiefs, please let us desist from causing confusion in our various communities. Speaking further, Awortu warned of the negative effect of cultism to generations yet unborn. He emphasized on the need for the living to leave a good legacy behind noting that the seed we sow today will not only be a hindrance to our communities and to our personal lives but it would be a greater hindrance to our children.

The Chairman further admonished the Andoni people at a funeral in Asarama that we are aware in this community and several other Andoni communities most families during the December period gather to do deliverance prayers, they say because of what our parents, our grandparents did, we need deliverance, those are the things standing as hindrance to our progress, some may be factual, some may not be factual but for those of us who are alive let us know and realize that there is no gain in being a strong man, there is no gain in causing confusion in your community because like the Preacher said, those things that cannot be mentioned in your biography are the things that will determine what happens to you hereafter and what happens to the family that you are leaving behind.

### **Conclusion**

It is evident from this study that the quest for peaceful coexistence, conflict resolution and peace building, inclusive development efforts, re-integration of deviant youth into the society are achievable through focused and people-oriented leadership as demonstrated in Andoni. The Niger Delta Region and indeed other parts of Nigeria that have been bedeviled by violent crimes, cultism, kidnappings, banditry and the likes can be brought under control should there be the political will and right leadership to address these ills. A focused leadership identifies the problems and challenges of her people and takes concrete steps in addressing them with a broad-base framework of consultations and inclusiveness as exemplified in Andoni. This study also revealed that people-centered leadership is key in conflict resolution and peace building efforts which eventually give every segment of the community a sense of belonging in government policies and agenda. We therefore conclude that the success story of Andoni can be replicated in other Local Government Areas in Rivers State while considering the peculiar needs of the people as this may vary for the different areas.



**Figure 2:** Barrister Erastus Charles Awortu (then Chairman of Andoni LGA) leading his delegation to the square to oversee the Oath-Taking Ritual



**Figure 3:** Barrister Erastus Charles Awortu (then Chairma of Andoni LGA) addressing Chiefs, Elders, Youths and the people before the Oath-Taking



**Figure 4:** Barrister Erastus Charles Awortu (then Chairma of Andoni LGA) seated along some Chiefs and Elders observing the event



**Figure 5:** The Chief Custodian of Andoni Deities Performing some Rites before the Oath-Taking by the concerned/repentant youths



**Figure 6:** Old Women of Andoni performing some Rites before the Oath-Taking by the concerned/repentant youths



**Figure 7:** Some Chiefs and Elders performing their respective Rites/Roles during the Oath-Taking Rituals



**Figure 8:** Some Chiefs and Elders performing their respective Rites/Roles during the Oath-Taking Rituals



**Figure 9:** The Repentant Youths taking turn during the Oath-Taking Ritual at Andoni Ancestral square



**Figure 10:** Boat Regatta during Andoni Carnival/Festival on the return of peace in the LGA after Oath-Taking Ceremony



**Figure 11:** Boat Regatta during Andoni Carnival/Festival on the return of peace in the LGA after Oath-Taking Ceremony reinforcing the importance of peace in the overall well-being of the people



**Figure 12:** Boat Regatta during Andoni Carnival/Festival on the return of peace in the LGA after Oath-Taking show casing of the best Art works in the Area.



**Figure 13:** Boat Regatta during Andoni Carnival/Festival on the return of peace in the LGA after Oath-Taking Ceremony promoting the culture heritage peaceful co-existence of the people

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