OIL POLITICS AND MILITANT VIOLENCE IN THE NIGER DELTA

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Abstract

This paper investigated the correlation between the discovery of oil and violent conflicts in the Niger Delta region. Using desk study, it affirmed the do mi at theme in the literature that blames conflict in the region on the effects of oil production and development neglect, but differs by noting that militant oil conflicts amount to terrorism.

Key Words: Oil politics, militancy, conflict, Niger Delta, Terrorism

Introduction

A deluge of literatures have been written by scholars, opinion leaders, stakeholders, among others to underscore the correlation between oil and violence that has shaped the landscape of the Niger Delta region for the past two decades. Central to the upsurge of violence in the region is the struggle to benefit from the gains of the oil and gas proceeds which has engendered the emergence of various militia groups, who resorted to the use of violence and extreme militancy against oil companies, other ethnic groups, neighbours and the Nigerian State. Highlighting the place of the oil industry in the emergence of armed militia groups in the Niger Delta, Femi Olokesui (cited in Ibaba, 2005) observes that:

In Nigeria, the petroleum industry has for long been plagued by these conflicts... These conflicts centre around... Widespread environmental degradation attributable to petroleum activities, human displacement, inadequate compensation for losses imposed on the community.... Level involvement in project planning.... leading to alienation.

Equally, Ako (2011) supports the view that there is a nexus between access to oil resources and violence in the Niger Delta. According to him:

The resource control discourse has become the bedrock of activities for various groups with different intents. These include militant/militia groups that initially conceptualized resource control as the fundamental basis of their struggle. Gangs and other criminal elements have opportunistically latched on to the rhetoric of resource control and operated within the pervasive sense of insecurity in the region to engage in criminal activities for personal gratification (Ako, 2011:45).

Contributing further on the role of the oil industry in fomenting violence in the region, Babatude (2010) indicated that oil-related activities have become a harbinger to endemic violence in the oil producing areas. According to him, these conflicts are multi-dimensional. The communal conflicts usually take the form of conflicts within a community, conflicts between host communities and the oil companies. Also, Babatude (2010,) asserted that territorial disputes and violent conflicts predate the discovery of oil. However, since the discovery of crude oil, cases of territorial disputes and violent conflicts have increased geometrically. Imobighe (2004) argued that oil companies operating in the region have played a very significant role in the collapse of the values and systems in the Niger Delta through an adverse reshaping of the local political landscape and the introduction of corrupt and divisive community relation policies.

It is on record that since the discovery and commercial exploitation of oil, cases of bloody conflicts have increased geometrically. The case of Arogbo-Ijaw and the Ugbo-Ilaje readily comes to mind, which was attributed to the discovery of oil wells in a boundary town between the two ethnic groups in 1998 (Albert, 2001). Babatude (2010) added further that even though oil companies are not doing enough to develop the area, the facts remain that communities reap financial benefits of having oil pipelines on their land, flow station, oil well, etc. and other oil installations. Compensations must be paid; contracts and jobs must result from the discovery of oil. Consequently, the struggles to benefit from royalties, contracts, jobs, etc. have exacerbated violence in the area.

In addition, the presence of oil has increased the struggle for political positions in the area. Positions such as the Chairman of Community Development Committee (CDC), Youth President, etc. have suddenly become very lucrative that elections into these positions are fiercely contested. In some communities' tens of millions of naira is spent to secure the positions. In some cases, oil companies would sponsor a particular candidate. The aftermath of this struggle for power is the violence which has led to the killings, and destruction of communities, property of candidates, etc. This being the case, because whoever wins, become a millionaire, given that the oil company would award him contracts and jobs for his boys. The above is a true reflection of a previous work by Ikelegbe (2005), which covered Delta, Rivers and Bayelsa States.

The result of the study by Ikelegbe (2005) confirmed the view of most residents and even academics that the struggle for oil money is an important cause of the pervasive conflict being witnessed in the region. According to him, most of these conflicts, including disputes that started before the exploitation of oil and gas such as the Ishekiri-Ijaw-Uhrobo conflict in Warri (Delta State) have been fuelled by the payment of oil rent, compensation, contracts, jobs, etc. Enweremadu (2009) further disclosed that the increasing role of oil is clearly reflected in several other violent conflicts such as the inter-community conflicts in the Soku Gas Plant area in Rivers State.

Furthermore, the case of Nembe in Bayelsa State would be handy; it resulted into the so-called Nembe war. The crisis began as a result of an agreement Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC) negotiated with chiefs of Nembe on compensations, contracts, job opportunities (United Nations Development Programme (2006). It was alleged that the chiefs cornered a disproportionate share of the benefits and appropriated the bulk of the fund to themselves, while most contracts were awarded to their companies and cronies. Hundreds of

people were consumed in the crisis, houses and property were destroyed and thousands of people were displaced.

The pervasive violence being witnessed which has resulted into killings, kidnappings, destructions of property, etc. aptly fit into the definition of terrorism, because according to the Nigerian Terrorism (prevention) Act 2011, section 1 (2) (i-iii), it defines terrorism as attacks upon a person's life which may cause bodily harm or death, kidnapping, as well as the destruction of government facilities or private property in a manner likely to endanger human life or result in a major economic loss (Punch 17, August, 2015). Therefore, our aim is to investigate the correlation between the discovery of oil and violent conflicts in the Niger Delta region.

Theoretical Perspective

The paper adopts as its analytical construct, the social production and distribution theory. It is synonymous with the Marxian socio-economic systems (Albakin, Dzarasov and Kulijov, (1983). The proponents of the theory include Marx (1976): Nnoli (1981): While Ogbam-Iyam (2005) popularized it. The choice of this approach is influenced by the fact that it scientifically studies the society as a whole and takes into consideration the interconnection of the social relations, class conflict and the organic relationship between the substructure (the economy) and the superstructure (politics).

The basic assumption of this theory is that central to all living things is security and survival and to achieve this, man must produce and reproduce itself. Every man is in an endless struggle to remain in a favourable position in the social production and reproduction process; those who are satisfied with the production systems struggle to retain the system while those that are not satisfied struggle to alter the system. According to Nnoli (1981), the social production and distribution give character to other human values. Social activities is in part fully related to pains, and pleasure, security and insecurity, violence, development, underdevelopment, crimes, etc. It is based on a combination of the quality of labour, non-human physical resources and interpersonal relations.

The approach is seen as a window to understand the laws that govern economic life of the society. It explains the relationship between what man produces and how he benefits from the surplus he produces. Ake (1981) posits that a major advantage of this approach is that it emphasizes the relatedness of social phenomena, exposing the links between the substructure and the superstructure. Furthermore, the approach helps to penetrate deep into the processes and policies, lay bare their essence and then explain concrete forms of their manifestation.

As Marx & Engels (1977) puts it, the history of all hitherto existed society is the history of class struggle. Thus, the class analysis framework of the approach best explains the endemic struggle between the exploiters (the multinational oil companies and government) and the exploited (the Niger Delta people, including the militant groups). Marxists hold that the dominated, exploited and marginalized groups, which paradoxically generated or bears the burdens of creating resources seeks to change the status quo when it becomes conscious (Libman & Borisox, 1985; Marx & Engels, 1977; Luckac, 1968).

Thus, in our dominant capitalist mode of production and distribution that have all the features noted above, we see conflicts, crimes and poverty because a few people control the means of production. It must be noted that capitalism has generated enormous wealth and

knowledge unparalleled to man; it has also engendered great disparity, poverty, human suffering, misery and securitized state institutions because it wants to protect the few that controls the means of production.

Therefore, militancy in the Niger delta region is attributed to the consciousness of exploitation being perpetrated against the people, and the struggle to change the status quo. This struggle has also created a state of insecurity which has assumed, to some extent, a terrorists dimension. Little wonder, radical scholars argue that though terrorism must be abhorred, however, it is a form of political participation.

Oil Violence as Terrorism

The struggle by the people of the Niger Delta to benefit from the proceeds of oil and gas resources which began as mere agitations and non-violent protest, has over the passage of time metamorphosed into full scale conflicts between and among communities, between the government and militia groups, leading to killings, kidnappings, destruction of communities and property, insecurity to lives, displacement, among other vices. Owugah (1999) has chronicled the struggle of the Niger Delta people into four phases. In his study, the first phase can be traced from the 1970s to the mid-1980s. According to him, the period was characterized by legal actions by host communities against oil companies for adequate compensation and usage of land.

The second phase began from the mid-1980s to mid-1990s, witnessed peaceful agitations, demonstrations and occupation of flow stations in demand for adequate compensation and provision of basic amenities. According to Owugah, the third and fourth phases represent the radical and violent epochs in the area, starting from the mid-1990s up till now. These phases are generally characterized by shutting down of flow stations, destruction of equipment, seizure of vessels and vehicles, kidnappings, killings and demands for ransoms. The latest phase could be aptly described as the era of terrorism in the Niger Delta.

Contributing further on the subject, Ikporukpo (1998) opines that the crisis actually began in the early 1990s when Civil Society Organizations in the Niger Delta agitated for improvement on the poor conditions of living in the area and exclusion of the people from the gains of the oil industry. Opinion is sharply divided on the historical basis of the conflict in the oil producing area. However, there are enough reasons and justification of 1990s as the era of violence and terrorism as means to gain from the proceeds of the oil and gas resources.

Indeed, it was the failure of strategies adopted in the first and second phases, according to Owugah, that prompted the youths to opt for armed option. This opinion has boomeranged into spates of violence. Apparently, it has assumed terrorism dimension which the Nigerian state can no longer contain. 2005 is significant because it marked a shift from earlier strategies and led to the emergence of various armed militia groups in the struggle to benefit from the oil revenue.

Available records clearly indicate that the people's quest to benefit from their oil resources has turned into terrorism and barefaced criminality. The Niger Delta area is ridden with cases of kidnappings, hostage takings for plump ransoms almost on daily basis; innocent people are killed, maimed and property worth billions of naira destroyed or looted, pipe-lines are blown up and oil bunkering, armed robbery, all these amounts to terrorism. Most of the militia

groups actively engage in kidnappings, because of the huge financial rewards accruing from it. Consequently, the militia groups are now infected with the virus of terrorism, anarchy, fear, cultism, unprecedented in the history of the Niger Delta.

It will be recalled that kidnapping began as a means to an end in 2005. It started when the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) kidnapped nine expatriate oil workers to demand for the release of the detained leader of the Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force (MDDVF) Asari Dokubo. They did not ask for ransom. But within 18 months that Dokubo was detained, the business of kidnapping not only prospered, it gained considerable leverage and almost displaced armed robbery as the "highest-paying" crime in the three States of Delta, Rivers and Bayelsa. In the past decade, gunmen have terrorized many inhabitants of the Niger Delta under the guise of struggle for oil revenue from government and multinational oil companies.

If we take the definition of terrorism as conceived by the Nigerian Terrorism Prevention Act (2011), we can argue that some oil-related violence in the Niger Delta is akin to terrorism. In fact, before the September 11, 2001, terrorists attacks on the United States, the US Department of State in its annual encyclopaedia of 'Global Terrorism' listed the Niger Delta – the geographical heart of oil production in Nigeria – as a breeding ground for militant and "impoverished ethnic groups" for whom terrorist acts (abduction, hostage taking, kidnapping and extrajudicial killings) were legion (cited in Oronto et al, 2004:1-2).

Little wonder scholars such as Ogundele, (2008); Dagne, (2006); Scott, (2007) have used rebels, insurgents, militants, terrorists, freedom fighters, etc to describe the crisis and those behind it. The terrorist dimension saw to huge destruction of oil installations, kidnapping of foreign (and later) indigenous oil workers, disruption of oil production and illegal oil trade or bunkering. At first glance, the Niger Delta crisis appears to be the acts of an insurgency. And then, they may not be terrorists but are using the tactics of terror.

Golder and Williams (2004: 272) argue that the lack of consensus on what constitutes terrorism points to its inescapably political nature, perhaps best encapsulated in the aphorism that 'one person's terrorist is another person's freedom fighter'. However, some of the oil-related violence perpetrated by the militants can be said to an act of terror. For instance, in what was described as "Al Qaeda-style terrorism" MEND had on July 12, 2009, blown up the receptor pipelines inside the 50 million-litre capacity Atlas Cove Jetty in Lagos, effectively crippling the capacity of the facility to receive petroleum products. The attack, which left five workers dead served both the propaganda aim of conviction and using coercion to get the Nigerian state rethink their "demand that the Delta receive more benefits from its oil" (Duffield, 2010). On October 1, 2010, two vehicle-improvised explosive devices were detonated near Abuja's Eagle Square, venue of the parade marking the country's 50th anniversary of independence (BBC, 2010). While the ceremonies were in progress, MEND gave a notice of intent through an emailed threat that bombs were to be detonated in clearly identified spots and time. It warned all "invited guests, dignitaries and attendees [that] "several explosive devices have been successfully planted in and around the venue by our operatives working inside the government security services...In evacuating the area, keep a safe distance from vehicles and trash bins" (Cited in Amaraegbu, 2011:211).

Over time, their tactics have evolved from crude kidnapping-for-ransom operations into more sophisticated and effective methods that combine hostage-taking and bombings (National

Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), 2008). Indeed, the Niger Delta Technical Committee Report acknowledged that the “militants have grown from rag-tag opportunistic group into very well-armed and well-organised combat forces” (Report of the Technical Committee on the Niger Delta, 2008: 52). The kidnapping of four foreign oil workers from a Shell flow station in Bayelsa on January 11, 2006 brought its existence into national and international consciousness. On 19th April, 2006, a military barracks in Port Harcourt witnessed a car bomb explosion where two people were killed and six seriously injured. On 29 April, 2006, MEND claimed responsibility for another bomb explosion that destroyed fuel tankers and other property at Effurun, the outskirts of Warri, Delta State, Cited in Amaraegbu, 2011:211).

Table 1. Selected Cases of Abductions/Kidnapping for Ransom (2002–2003)

S/N	Action/ Date	MNC/Oil Servicing Co.	Youth Group/Ethnic Group/State	Ascertained Purpose	Outcome
1	Hostage taking of 10 workers/ April 2002	Shell	Militant Youth Gang, Ekeremor LGA, Ijaw/ Balyesa State	Ransom Demand for NGN 3.1m.	Resulted from failure to yield to alleged frivolous demands
2	Kidnap of staff/ June 29–July 2003	Oil Servicing Co. working for Shell	Ijaw youth militants in Bomadi/Burutu LGAs/ Delta State	Demand for NGN 25.4m	State Government Intervention/ Negotiated release after 14 days
3	Kidnap of 9 crew & 4 military escorts of oil barges/ November 11–13 2003	Ijaw Militants	Ransom/ Other demands	Released 2 days later after threats by State Government/ Security Agencies	3
4	Kidnap of 14 workers/ November 2003	Chevron Texaco	Militant Ijaw youths/ Bayelsa State	Ransom demands	Intervention of State Government
5	Kidnap of 19 oil workers	Nobel Drilling/Prospecting.	Ijaw Militias/ Delta State	Ransom demands	Intervention of State Government
6	Kidnap of 7 workers/ November 28– December 2003	Bredero Shaw Oil Servicing Co. (Shell)	Militant Ijaw Youths/ Delta State	Ransom demands for USD 5m.	State Government Intervention/ Negotiation

7	Murder of 7 workers & military personnel/ April 2004	Chevron Texaco	Militant youths along Benin River area/ Delta State	--	--
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Source: Ikelegbe (2005:219)

Oil and Conflicts in the Niger Delta Region

Myriads of factors have been cited as responsible for the increasing wave of violent conflicts being witnessed in the Niger Delta region. Chief among them are demand for compensation for land used, demand for jobs and contracts, protest against environmental degradation, resource control, exclusion of host communities, under development, etc. The bottom-line of these agitations is the struggle to benefit from the proceeds of oil and gas resources exploited from their lands and water. On the whole, the negative impacts of the conflicts on the area have taken varied dimensions: killings, kidnappings, displacements and associated refugees problems, destruction of communities and property, insecurity of lives, etc. Perhaps, the analysis of the types of conflicts will shed more light on the issue (Ibaba & Arugu, 2013).

Intra and inter community. Oil resources and the oil companies have continued to play a crucial role in most intra- community and inter -community crises. In many communities, people struggle over oil resources results in violent conflicts. According to Ibaba & Arugu (2013), these conflicts largely occur as a result of disputes between or within communities, and community factions such as chiefs, youths, groups, etc. in their bids to gain from oil and gas proceeds. Common issues of contention include disagreement on land ownership between families within communities where oil well was discovered, where flow station is located and pipeline right of way, rightful occupant of chieftaincy stool, sharing of compensation paid by oil companies, for instance, the case of Peremabiri community in Bayelsa State was over the sharing of compensation paid by SPDC, which led to the destruction of the once thriving town and the killings of hundreds of people in the 1990s. Headship of Community Development Committee (CDC) and Youth President have become an issue because these positions command power and whoever heads these bodies is sure of contracts from the oil companies. Therefore, there is always intense struggle to head these bodies in every oil producing community, quest for oil company jobs, contacts, etc. In addition, in order to sustain production, the oil companies “buy peace”, supporting one faction against the other. In some communities, chiefs are patronized and while in others, it is the youths. Given that patronage comes with a lot of money and by extension power and high status, those who are excluded fight to retain patronage (Ibaba, 2005).

Also, instances of inter community conflicts over land ownership are common, where oil well is sited and pipeline right of way all geared toward benefiting financially from oil companies. Nna (1999) corroborated the above view that the dominant form of crisis in the Niger Delta relates to the conflicts between communities and the oil companies, communities and the state, inter community conflicts and, intra community. All or almost all of these drive from oil and its related activities. He notes that inter-ethnic conflicts have characterized the Niger Delta Region. The most pronounced cases are pairs of Ijaw and Itsekiri, Urhobo and Itsekiri in Delta

State, Ogoni and Okrika, Andoni and Ogoni in Rivers and Ilaje and Ijaw in Ondo State where tens of thousands of people were consumed, communities sacked, and property destroyed (UNDP, 2006). The common causes of these conflicts are ownership of land where oil wells are located.

Ibaba & Arugu (2013,) posited that conflicts between oil companies and oil producing communities can be traced to the 1970s and manifest as litigation over destruction of property and payment of compensation, occupation and blockade of oil production facilities and sites, sabotage of oil pipelines and facilities, kidnapping of oil company personnel. On the whole, dissatisfaction with the negative impact and benefits of oil production is the cause of conflicts. The most notable case of community-oil company conflicts was the total destruction of Umechem in Rivers State in 1990, which resulted in the death of 20 villagers and the destruction of 495 houses by the Anti-Riot Mobile Police men invited by Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC) to quell protest by the community over payment of compensation. Similarly, the World Bank confirms this view in its 1985 Report that:

Conflicts between stakeholders over resources rights and uses are endemic in the region. The most frequent and serious conflicts have pitched local communities against the oil communities.

We can say that Community/State conflicts in the Niger Delta were an extension of community-oil company conflicts. The attacks on the oil companies, who are into joint venture business in the oil industry with the Nigerian Government meant that government interests were also under attack. We can infer from the above that the militancy and instability in the oil producing communities is the logical fallout of the struggle by these communities to have their share of the oil and gas revenues. The struggle has led to the emergence of various militia groups, which resulted into killings, destruction of communities and property, displacements, kidnappings, loss of livelihood, insecurity to lives, etc.

The struggle to benefit from the oil and gas resources has led to the rise of political consciousness which has induced a large segment of the youth into radical political stance because the youths are the vanguards of the struggle. Ibaba (2005) corroborated this position and asserted that the youths bear much of the frustration which resulted from deprivation of the region. Therefore, what obtained in the oil producing communities in the Niger Delta amounts to terrorism. It fits into the Hobbesian State of nature, a state where man is an enemy unto men. Hobbes (Ibaba, 2005) noted that:

In such condition, there is no place for industry; because the fruit therefore is uncertain; and consequently no culture of the earth..... no commodious building no knowledge of the face of the earth, and which worse of all, continuous fear, and danger of violent death.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The emergence of difference groups with conflicting claims to oil revenue has introduced violent conflicts unprecedented in the history of the region. It has turned neighbour against

neighbour, community against community, one ethnic group against another, the people against the oil companies and the people against the state. The result is the emergence of militia groups to fight for their share of the oil proceeds. In the course of the struggle, they have turned monsters, hurting, killing, kidnapping, destroying communities, etc. which amounts to terrorism. Studies have revealed that the failure of governance is partly responsible for the conflict and subsequent terrorism in the region. The government's inability to provide the enabling environment has led to high rate of unemployment and disarticulation of the economy. Consequently, youths in the region see the oil industry as the source of making money and this has heightened conflicts in the region. Therefore, the paper recommends as follows:

- The restructuring of the country's federal system of government to guarantee the devolution of powers from the central government to the states and the local government areas.
- Constitutional amendment to transfer resources ownership to the States or increase the derivation from the present 13% to 50%
- The Federal and States governments should focus on the infrastructure development, environment restoration and economic empowerment of the region.
- The oil companies should set aside part of their annual profit to empower the area such as skills acquisition for the youths and set up business concerns for them.

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