

COUNCIL *on*
FOREIGN
RELATIONS

WORKING PAPER

Understanding the Armed Groups of the Niger Delta

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September 2009

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Foreword

Nigeria is Africa's most populous country and currently its largest oil producer. But the region of Nigeria where the oil is produced, the delta, has been environmentally despoiled by the industry, and its people have remained largely in poverty. Some two decades ago, protest against these conditions began to turn violent. Largely peaceful protests and various limited concessions to local needs had not only failed to reverse these underlying conditions but led at various times to government repression and in one famous case the execution of a prominent protest leader. Today this unrest has grown into a major insurgency, but one made complex by a mixture of protest, greed, crime, and political collusion. It is not easy to understand the motives, nor surely the intrigue, that makes this situation seemingly intractable and that has made peace efforts to date unsuccessful.

This paper, *Understanding the Armed Groups of the Niger Delta*, by Judith Asuni is aimed at helping understand one crucial element of this situation. It provides an in-depth analysis of the rise of militancy in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. Most important, the paper provides insight into the origins and personalities of the various militant groups and their leaders. It explains the ways by which groups move from protest to violent activity, from acting against grievances to heavy involvement in criminal activity. The line between protest and criminality indeed often shifts, or overlaps. The importance of ethnic identities and rivalries are made clear, but equally the shifting of alliances and loyalties that sometimes cross ethnic lines, on the other hand sometimes lead to fissions within ethnic groups. Hints of political collusion with militants run through the narrative.

The Council on Foreign Relations commissioned this study to help advance the prospects for peace. The unrest in the Niger Delta that has continued for more than two decades poses a threat not only to the people of the region, but to the stability of Nigeria and to the surrounding West Africa region. To date, various efforts by government, by outside mediation groups, and by civil society have failed to overcome the basic antipathies and conflicting interests that fuel the conflict. In recent months the conflict has worsened. In May 2009, there was a large-scale government military attack on major militant camps, with reportedly considerable loss of life and damage to civilians. At the same time the Nigerian government offered an amnesty to militants under certain conditions. Yet neither of these initiatives, nor the two together, have overcome the tension nor addressed the underlying causes of the crisis. The future appears as uncertain and fraught with the threat of violence as before.

This conflict has cost the Nigerian government dearly. As much as one million barrels' worth of daily oil production has been shut in due to violence. This has severely reduced government revenue, affecting the entire country. Unrest in the Niger Delta has also frequently caused the world price of oil to spike. Meanwhile, a significant amount of oil is being regularly stolen through collusion between militant groups, corrupt politicians, and other officials and the proceeds from the sale of this oil has financed a steadily increased sophistication of arms flowing to the militant groups. These groups are now capable of attacking offshore oil installations as well as onshore ones, and even attacking neighboring countries. Thus the problem has acquired a regional dimension.

To address this situation, it is essential to have an understanding of the dynamics of the unrest, in particular the source of the militancy and its complex structures and objectives. The Council on Foreign Relations hopes that this report will contribute significantly to such understanding and add greater substance to the efforts of those seeking to bring peace to this region. The Council will continue to study this situation and to make every effort to contribute to a just and lasting solution to the conflict.

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Introduction

When a group of Western oil workers was kidnapped in the Niger Delta in January 2006, the immediate hike in prices at gas stations around the world served as a timely reminder of the importance of this unstable region to international oil supplies. A previously unknown group announced it was holding the workers. It called itself the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) and quickly sparked panic within the oil industry with a second set of kidnappings and a series of attacks on oil facilities. Anxiety reached new heights when, in an email sent to journalists, MEND claimed responsibility for an attack on an offshore facility, Bonga, in mid-2008. The installation, located a full seventy-five miles from the mainland, had previously been considered too ambitious a target for the militants. By the summer of 2008, oil was trading at \$147 a barrel and oil production in the Delta was down by a quarter. Who was this mysterious group, whose members—armed with little more than a few AK-47s and speedboats—were able to massively disrupt oil supplies and wreak havoc on world commodity prices? Where did it come from, and what does it want? Is it a coherent group with clearly defined aims and political ambitions? Or is it merely a disparate ragtag of disillusioned youths, with powerful backers, intent on little more than petty criminality?

As will be explained in this paper, MEND is a constantly changing mass of groups, some of them criminally motivated, others politically and ideologically driven. It is difficult to distinguish between them. Some started life on the university campuses before spilling onto the streets and engaging in criminal activity. Other groups set out to genuinely address the grievances of the Niger Delta people, enraged by decades of environmental pollution, economic underdevelopment and political marginalization. However, the involvement of corrupt outsiders soon took their militancy far beyond any ideological goal.

No one knows exactly how many people are involved in militant activity in the Niger Delta, but a study conducted in 2007 for the Delta State government hints at the scale of the problem. It found there to be forty-eight recognizable groups in Delta State alone, boasting more than 25,000 members and with an arsenal of approximately 10,000 weapons.¹ It is estimated by the author that there may be up to 60,000 members of armed groups in the Niger Delta as a whole.

All of the groups rely on the tacit support of local communities that share their anger at the exploitation of their region by oil companies and the federal and state governments. Many of the groups depend on patronage from politicians who use them to attack and intimidate their opponents. In addition, many armed groups are enlisted by politicians and military officers to help support their criminal activities, which include oil theft (known as bunkering) and arms importation.

This paper attempts to identify MEND and the other main armed groups in the Niger Delta, trace their origins, explain their motivations and influences, and suggest ways of addressing their grievances. It will focus on the armed groups in the three core Niger Delta states of Rivers, Bayelsa, and Delta, the areas that have been worst affected by violence over the past fifteen years. Because the groups present a very confusing collage, with different origins, aims, and motivations, academics and

journalists have struggled to describe them accurately. This paper takes a different approach, using firsthand information gathered by the author during years of working with the armed groups in disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) activities and other peace and development initiatives. In this way it is hoped that the reader will be able to make sense out of an extremely complex, disturbing, and dangerous phenomenon that affects not only the Niger Delta, but indeed the world economy, which is affected by fluctuating oil prices and the spillover effects of regional insecurity.

Background

Nigeria is a densely populated and highly heterogeneous country of approximately 140 million people comprising about 350 different ethnic groups and divided evenly between Christians and Muslims. Nigeria won its independence from Britain in 1960, and since then has spent more time under military than civilian rule. The current democratic dispensation came into office in 1999 and is dominated by the People's Democratic Party (PDP), which proudly calls itself the largest party in Africa. The PDP controls the federal government and the vast majority of state positions and wields a formidable political patronage network. Although overall standards of governance have improved, Nigeria's economic development continues to be held back by corruption and political instability.

The thirty-six states of Nigeria are divided into six geopolitical zones of six states each. The South-South zone consists of the following states, moving from east to west: Cross River, Akwa Ibom, Rivers, Bayelsa, Delta, and Edo. The term "Niger Delta" generally refers to these states but is sometimes also used to include Imo, Abia, and Ondo States as they are also oil producers, albeit minor ones. The core Niger Delta consists of Rivers, Bayelsa, and Delta States.

The Niger Delta is home to about 140 different ethnic groups in the nine states included in a broader definition of the region. In common with other parts of Nigeria, this ethnic diversity has often led to competition for resources in the form of land, economic benefits, or political power. Nowhere has this contest been fought with more intensity than in Warri, in Delta State, which not coincidentally happens to be the western center of the oil industry in the Delta. Of the three ethnic groups living in the region, the Urhobo, has harbored a longstanding resentment of the Itsekiris for the perceived favoritism shown toward the latter during the colonial era. The Ijaw, the largest group across the three states in this study, was traditionally less involved in this competition, but the situation radically changed when oil was discovered in the riverine region in which they predominantly live.²

The first significant use of arms in the Niger Delta occurred in 1966, when Isaac Adaka Boro formed an Ijaw group, the Niger Delta Volunteer Force, and declared a republic. His uprising was crushed by the federal government within days, but his demands for greater autonomy for the people of the region inspired later activists such as Ken Saro Wiwa and "Mujahid" Dokubo-Asari.³ Saro Wiwa raised awareness about the environmental pollution caused by the oil industry and highlighted the lack of representation of the Niger Delta people, especially the Ogonis. He helped found the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP), which in 1990 published an Ogoni Bill of Rights. The arrest and execution of Saro Wiwa and eight of his colleagues at the hands of the Abacha regime in 1995 caused outrage and drew international attention to the plight of the people of the Niger Delta for the first time.

Over the past forty years, Warri has been a frequent flashpoint for interethnic tension, with outbreaks of warfare between the Itsekiris and the Urhobos or between the Itsekiris and the Ijaws. Yet communal violence has not been confined to Delta State, however. A desire to control oil or gas facilities along disputed borders has been instrumental in causing conflict across the region. Further east,

in Rivers State, clashes have broken out between the ethnically Ijaw Okrikans and the Elemes (who are related to the Ogonis). Bayelsa State has not been spared, either. The historic Nembe kingdom has been torn apart by resource-driven power struggles, as have some other neighboring communities.

While ethnic cleavages are intense in the Niger Delta, its inhabitants are united by a sense of grievance about the exploitation and neglect of their region. The federal government virtually ignored the Niger Delta during the 1990s, leaving development in the hands of the oil companies in an era when corporate social responsibility meant little. The federal government in 1979 established the oil deposits as a national asset, taking away any local ownership or control. Indeed, from the earliest discovery of oil, the delta region has been deprived the benefits from this resource, which finances much of the federal government and the state governments of the rest of the country. For decades, moreover, the oil industry exploited the area and in the process polluted the riverine environment, wiping out the traditional livelihoods of fishing and farming, but providing few jobs in return. Today, with a greater sense of social responsibility, and facing serious losses of production, the oil industry is finding it difficult to deal with the immensity and complexity of the situation, vacillating between support of various development projects and taking narrower steps to protect its immediate facilities. In addition, the remoteness and inhospitable geography of the region have hampered the limited attempts to develop infrastructure. Roads in the Niger Delta cost four times more to build than those on dry land, leaving the canoe or motorboat as the primary form of transport. The difficulty of moving goods and people means that essential supplies—including petroleum products—cost more in the Niger Delta than in other parts of Nigeria. Thus a combination of geography, ethnic tension, economic underdevelopment, and the presence of an industry that yields many disadvantages but few direct advantages to the people of the region, have created a situation ripe for conflict.

While some groups, such as MOSOP, tried to address these environmental, political, social, and economic injustices through dialogue, others chose armed struggle. Oil installations and their employees were an obvious target. Attacks by armed groups occurred intermittently until about 2004, and were usually accompanied by demands for additional benefits from the oil companies. Since that date, the frequency and ferocity of the attacks have increased, showing more signs of planning and sophistication. Kidnapping has become endemic.

In many cases, the armed groups soon forgot their goal of promoting social justice and self-empowerment and focused instead on enriching themselves through criminal activity. Powerful outsiders lost little time in attaching themselves to these illicit activities. A lucrative drug trade centered on Port Harcourt, the main city in Rivers State, was later eclipsed in magnitude by the oil bunkering trade, which offered enormous profits but led to unprecedented levels of violence and an influx of sophisticated weaponry.

Motivations of the Armed Groups

The armed groups of the Niger Delta are nebulous and hard to categorize. One of the few studies to attempt this task involved conducting in-depth interviews with individual militants. It found that the vast majority tended to be

- males aged twenty to thirty-nine;
- single but with dependants;
- unemployed;
- from broken homes, lacking role models;
- drug users and often dealers;
- economically powerless and therefore totally reliant on their leaders for financial and social support, food, and housing; and/or
- barely literate, although their leaders were often educated up to secondary or even tertiary level.⁴

Members of militant groups expressed a variety of reasons for joining. These initially included

- a desire to protect their land, their community, or their ethnic group;
- a desire to protest against government and oil companies' political and economic marginalization of their communities, regions, and ethnic groups;
- fear for their personal safety following threats by members of other armed groups or government security agencies;
- being hired by politicians to help rig elections, intimidate voters, and attack opponents;
- a desire to make money through criminal activities. For some militants, armed groups represented the only available source of income; others saw the chance to supplement an existing income through criminality;
- peer pressure; and/or
- low self-esteem that led impressionable young men to seek power and influence in armed groups.

Additional research carried out in 2008 uncovered new motivations⁵, including

- "greed," prompted by a keener awareness of the riches to be gained from kidnapping⁶;
- a desire to avenge the deaths of friends or family members;
- a vague desire for the prestige to be gained from posing as a freedom fighter and protector of one's people against "the establishment"; and/or
- coercion from existing members of armed groups.

Origins of the Armed Groups

The origins of the Niger Delta's armed groups vary across the three states in this study—Bayelsa, Rivers, and Delta—but while the picture is complicated, it is possible to identify some common themes. Many groups were formed on university campuses, branched off into street gangs, became involved in illegal activities such as drug dealing and oil bunkering, and were hired as political thugs. The story of many of the armed groups, particularly in Rivers State, begins on the campuses of some of the country's leading universities.

UNIVERSITY CONFRATERNITIES

Nigerian universities have a long tradition of active and influential student associations, or confraternities. The movement began at the University of Ibadan (UI) in 1952, with the creation of the Pyrates Confraternity, later renamed the National Association of Sea Dogs (NAS). The founders were a group of students of good character, including the Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka. Like their U.S. equivalent, the confraternities offered a range of benefits including lifelong membership, social events, and networking opportunities. While their members indulged in some boisterous antics, roaming the streets of the UI campus late at night, drinking, and singing, neither the Pyrates Confraternity nor the NAS indulged in any serious lawbreaking. A breakaway group, the Buccaneer Association, was also formed at the University of Ibadan in the early 1970s and, like the Pyrates, spread to various parts of Nigeria. The confraternities later took on a more political and ideological bent. The Neo-Black Movement of Africa was one prominent example. Founded at the University of Benin (Edo State) in the mid-1970s, it sought to revive aspects of African culture.

The tenor of these groups began to change in the mid 1980s as they shifted from respectable social clubs to belligerent gangs that terrorized their campuses, a transformation that reflected a wider breakdown of traditional values in society. While the members still referred to their groups as confraternities, outsiders preferred to use the word cult, a term intended to signify the secretive nature of these groups, with their oaths and rituals and behavior, which often strayed outside accepted social norms. The main competitors were the Klansmen Konfraternity (KKK) at the University of Calabar (in Cross River State), founded in 1983, the Black Axe Confraternity (which had links with the Neo-Black Movement), and the Supreme Vikings Confraternity (SVC), a splinter faction of the Buccaneers. Some of these groups had affiliated female confraternities but their members have generally not played an active role in the current violence. Many of the politicians in the Niger Delta, especially in Rivers and Bayelsa states, are known to be members of confraternities, particularly the Vikings. The university confraternities generally try to maintain some legitimacy and respectability but many campuses have become the settings for vicious inter-cult fighting and killings of not only students, but also lecturers and members of the public.

STREET GANGS

The inter-confraternity competition took on a more sinister tone when chapters were established at the University of Port Harcourt in Rivers State. For the first time, the Vikings and KKK faced each other in violent conflict and their rivalries soon spilled from the university onto the streets. Members found themselves being targeted by their enemies while away from campus, so they hired younger boys for protection. This led to the creation of allied street gangs or cults. As one militant leader described it: "Vikings and KKK always had clash in school. Vikings could not attack KKK directly so they formed Icelando to fight. KKK got the Deebam. Parents do not know of their sons' involvement in cultism. So to avoid public humiliation they got younger boys of fourteen to eighteen years of age to do the job."⁷ The KKK formed its own street gang- the Deebam ('Be Strong' in pidgin English). To cope with this threat, the Viking-affiliated street gang, the Icelando, drew new recruits from an even younger age group of "small beasts" (boys): "These small, small ones at that time were between 12 to 15 years. These types of young boys don't have feelings. They don't have regard for anybody. They are very, very bad."⁸ In this way, what had started out as a collection of harmless university associations had spread outside the campuses and metamorphosed into a series of violent street cults consisting of younger teenagers, many of them armed with machetes and other weapons. It was not long before they moved from violent disorder to organized crime.

THE DRUG TRADE

The nature of the armed groups changed once more in the early 1990s, when their leaders woke up to the lucrative possibilities the drug trade offered. One enterprising seventeen-year-old with the street name Kockman was quick to seize on this potential. Born in Canada to a well-placed family, he became the head of the Icelando cult and competed with the KKK for control of the Port Harcourt market for cocaine, heroin, and marijuana imported from Lagos, where the major traffickers were based. While many cult members smoked cigarettes and marijuana and drank alcohol, they made sure it did not interfere with business, as one leader made clear: "We were not supposed to use drugs. We only sell to fools, especially government 'big boys.'"⁹ A subsequent leader of the Icelando cult, known as Casi, explained that drug dealing soon became the main activity of his group: "Between 1996 and 2001, I was a gangster. We started the confraternity business in 1993. The aims and objectives of the confraternity were not the slaying or killing of people. We were trying to look after each other's welfare. Icelanders were seriously involved in the drug ring. The entire Ship (confraternity) protects you when you are selling these drugs."¹⁰ Battles between the Icelandos and the KKK over the drugs trade soon turned bloody. According to one militant, matters came to a head when a young girl involved with boys from both sides was killed in a traffic accident. At the funeral, large numbers turned up from both cult groups, tempers flared, and an Icelando was accidentally killed. "That was how the whole killings started. They were using guerrilla tactics; you look for somebody and kill him, somebody would look for you and kill you. So a lot of people were dying along the line."¹¹ As these groups become more heavily involved in the drug trade, and the potential profits grew, inter-cult violence escalated, leading them to acquire more sophisticated arms, which in turn led to more deaths. The university students who founded the original confraternities in Port Harcourt recruited younger and less educated teenagers to fight their street battles, while these youths in turn recruited still younger

boys. By this process a hierarchy of armed young people was formed. Life became cheaper the lower down the pecking order one descended.

OIL BUNKERING

As control of the drug trade became more dangerous and hotly contested, the armed groups of the Niger Delta began to search out new sources of illicit gain. Given its local abundance, petroleum was an obvious attraction. Gangs began stealing crude oil by either hacking into the pipeline directly or by tapping the wellhead, removing the structure at the top (called the Christmas tree), and attaching a hose to siphon off the oil. From there, the oil was placed on small barges and taken out to sea, where it was loaded onto large ships lurking out of sight of the authorities. In return for their oil, the bunkers would receive money and weapons. The scale of this illicit trade was enormous. From an early stage, senior military and political figures took a lead role in bunkering, and a highly sophisticated international trade developed, often coordinated by foreigners, particularly from Lebanon and Russia. A carefully structured system of bribes ensured that officials and community leaders at all levels of the operation allowed the oil to pass by undisturbed. While the evidence suggests that oil workers were initially enlisted to help with bunkering, it did not take long for the armed groups to gain the technical expertise necessary in order to take the entire process in-house.

One of the most notorious and feared figures to emerge from the Niger Delta, Ateke Tom, cut his teeth in the bunkering trade, amassing a fortune in the process. Formerly an impoverished mud brick salesman, he transformed his fortunes in the oil business, initially by providing protection for an oil servicing company before turning to bunkering. As the enterprise developed, so did its capacity to attract violence, as rival groups battled for control of the market, aided by an influx of firearms purchased with bunkering profits. Street gangs such as the Icelandos and Bermuda Boys engaged in bloody feuds in their attempt to dominate the market in the Okrika region of Rivers State. One of Ateke's main rivals was Mujahid Dokubo-Asari, who later went on to found the Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force. Asari was quite open about his involvement in bunkering, claiming he had a legitimate right to lay his hands on the resources of the Niger Delta, on the grounds that they belonged to the local people rather than the Federal Government. Most of his profits, however, were spent on funding his own armed group and buying weapons. According to a former militant, Ateke responded to this threat to his business empire by forming his own armed group, the Niger Delta Vigilantes (NDV):

On Ateke's side were Vikings, Icelandos, and some captured Greenlanders [another armed group] to form Niger Delta Vigilantes. He also had the support of Rivers State Government who supplied him arms and money. Full war broke out between these two war lords and their followers. The state was hot for six months 'til ... people were brought before the President for peace talks on October 1, 2004.¹²

Much of the violence in Rivers State during this period can therefore be attributed to rivalry between two criminal gangs who fought a drawn-out battle for control of the trade in illegal oil.

External Factors in the Formation and Proliferation of Armed Groups

Having examined some of the common motivations of the Niger Delta militants and charted their progress from the universities to the streets and into criminal organizations, this paper now examines external factors in the Niger Delta that have influenced these groups and aided their development.

ETHNIC RIVALRY

The emergence of heavily armed groups in the Niger Delta has often combined longstanding ethnic rivalries and competition over resources to form a volatile mix. Their malevolent influence contributed to a particularly serious spate of violence in Warri, in Delta State. Here, three ethnic groups—the Urhobos, the Itsekiris, and the Ijaws—were already engaged in a deadly struggle for the right to win contracts, rent, and employment from the local oil companies. Rival ethnic groups armed and trained the militants and set them loose on their enemies. Often, money given in good faith by oil companies to local communities for development projects was spent on weapons for their quasi military forces instead, further escalating tensions. Warri saw heavy fighting in 1997, 1999, and 2003. In a situation common to other parts of Nigeria, the 1997 war centered on a dispute about the proposed location of local government headquarters—offices that guaranteed a steady stream of revenue and employment to the host community. After the 2003 fighting, in which many Itsekiri villages were destroyed and Chevron was forced to shut in much of its land-oil production, the federal government dispatched a joint task force to the area, a move that signaled the beginning of the militarization of the Niger Delta.

Armed groups originally set up to fight interethnic wars often ended up working for criminals. Some provided security for oil bunkering gangs, while others operated as mercenaries, carrying out acts of political violence for well-connected officials. For example, the 2007 gubernatorial elections in Delta State saw ethnic armed groups intervene in a contest between Itsekiri and Urhobo candidates, while armed Ijaw groups crossed state boundaries to partake in political violence in Bayelsa State.

Sometimes the interethnic warfare provided a convenient cover for illicit activities. Bunkerers established armed groups to stir up ethnic discord, creating an atmosphere of chaos that diverted attention from their operations. An Itsekiri youth leader said that members of his community had been manipulated in this way and used to pick a fight with the Ijaws:

Local militia armies of non-state armed actors were formed in the riverine communities to protect bunkering interests. The foreign expatriate buyers demanded that there was a need for an atmosphere of lawlessness in the communities leading from

the mouth of both the Benin and Escravos Rivers to give opportunity for vessels to come into the country unhindered. Due to the fact that the Itsekiri communities who are peace loving were at the mouth of the two rivers, they decided to use the Itsekiri as tools to engender violence, disorder and lawlessness needed for both the free inflow of the arms and the outflow of the crude oil.¹³

The presence of ethnic tension in the Niger Delta provided a conducive atmosphere for increasingly intense competition for resources, jobs, and other benefits from the oil industry. But they also created fertile ground for ambitious activists, criminals, and corrupt politicians to exploit these tensions for their own purposes leading to the formation of present day armed militia and the proliferation of criminal activities associated with the oil industry that has sustained them.

COMMUNITY INTERACTION

The armed groups of the Niger Delta have a complex relationship with the communities in which they live. Few towns or villages have been untouched by the violence that the groups have brought upon the region. Nonetheless, while it is easy to discern hostility and resentment toward the military, many communities have an ambivalent attitude towards the militants. While they may have little time for their methods, most sympathize with their professed aims of bringing an end to the economic marginalization of the Delta. Militants such as Asari and Tom Polo, the head of MEND in Delta State, Tom Polo, have been able to portray themselves as freedom fighters, battling on behalf of their communities against the federal government and oil companies' greed and exploitative policies. Niger Delta communities have therefore frequently sustained the militant groups, harboring their leaders and hiding their hostages, weapons, and equipment. In addition, most communities have built up their own armories—a product of frequent interethnic conflict—and have often been willing to lend or rent them out to armed groups. Some community leaders have also offered financial support for their fighting youth, diverting funds intended for development projects.

While they may have their supporters, the armed groups also rely heavily on coercion and intimidation to ensure that the communities that shelter them remain compliant. Militants have found it easy to impose themselves upon their host communities, taking advantage of the breakdown of the traditional social structure in the Niger Delta, where chiefs and elders' influence has been on the wane for years. Once established, they are hard to remove. Ateke has been able to drift in and out of his community of Okochiri in Okrika for many years without fear of being betrayed to the authorities. The governor of Rivers State at one point demanded that the residents hand him over, but they refused, no doubt aware that the consequences of betraying Ateke would be worse for them than anything the military could do. The close relationship between the general population of the Niger Delta and its militant groups makes it extremely difficult for the authorities to apprehend the armed men without causing great destruction and mass casualties. The military, for example, has been unable to mount an operation against one of the leaders of MEND, Farah Dagogo, because of the close proximity of his camp to the civilian population of Kula. When it has acted, the results have been catastrophic. The towns of Odi and Odiana in Bayelsa State were virtually leveled in November 1999 when soldiers were sent in to flush out militia groups thought to be sheltering in their midst.

TRADITIONAL POWER

In addition to the breakdown of traditional authority structures, which is occurring in virtually all parts of Nigeria, armed groups have also been used to manipulate the traditional power structures of communities in the Niger Delta, undermining authority and accelerating the breakdown of societies. In Okrika, in Rivers State, Abiye Sekibo used his position as the secretary to the state government to manipulate the relationship between the two main groups in the community: the Tubonijus, from whose ranks the kings are drawn, and the Konijus, who have not historically produced kings. Upon the death of Okrika's king, Sekibo used his political clout to impose a friendly successor from among the Tubonijus and also create a new kingship for the Konijus. The armed groups on his payroll were used to enforce this decision and bypass the will of the people. In the Nembe Kingdom of Bayelsa State, modern political support was also used to fast-track a new king's anointment before potential opposition could organize itself.

POLITICAL CORRUPTION

The endemic chicanery and corruption associated with Nigerian politics, at both the national and state levels, have created perfect conditions for armed groups to flourish. Unscrupulous politicians were quick to spot the usefulness of having hired muscle to further their ambitions. Armed men were employed to interfere in the 1999 elections in Rivers State, helping to rig the vote. By 2003, their influence was clear for all to see. Rivers State politicians belonging to all parties hired armed groups to intimidate and sometimes kill political opponents, deter voters from going to the polls, steal ballot boxes, and deliver the result their sponsors demanded. In return for their assistance, militias received weapons and money. Both Ateke and Asari were hired to ensure victory for the PDP, its incumbent governor, Peter Odili, and the secretary of the state government, Abiye Sekibo (although both militants later fell out with their political masters). Ateke appeared to relish his role, explaining his main responsibilities in a television interview: "I check everything, I watch people, I beat people; I do so many things. Everybody they are afraid of me, they are scared of me."¹⁴ By the 2007 elections, little attempt was being made to obscure armed groups' brazen activities, as Human Rights Watch observed: "One cult member described a meeting in Government House in Port Harcourt just prior to the April 14 polls during which he saw government officials hand out between N5 million and N10 million (\$38,000 to \$77,000) to several different cult groups in return for their assisting or simply accepting the PDP's plans to rig the polls."¹⁵

Violence also played a part in the 2007 Delta State elections, where armed militiamen operated in consort with previously unarmed groups such as the National Association of Military Pensioners. As a uniformly Ijaw state, Bayelsa was a natural support base for the PDP. Yet even here, armed youth were hired to help bring in the vote. This is not to suggest that the PDP wasn't alone in its use of force during election campaigns; it was a tactic used by politicians of all parties.

Many militant groups were never disarmed after the elections were held, becoming in effect standing armies for their political patrons. But while the armed groups remained, their political allegiances constantly shifted. Sekibo found himself unable to reign in Ateke's excesses, and the pair had a falling out during the 2007 election campaign when the latter blew up several police stations in Port Harcourt, freeing his supporters but injuring many bystanders. However, by 2008 it seemed that Ateke and Sekibo had settled their differences and were reportedly working together once more to destabilize

ize the current governor in Rivers State, who had fallen out with them and his former godfather, Odili.

THE ROLE OF THE MILITARY

The Nigerian military, which is paid to confront and tackle the armed groups of the Niger Delta, has in many cases aided their activities—either directly, by participating in their criminal endeavors—or indirectly, by pushing ordinary communities into the arms of the militants through their overbearing presence in the Delta and acts of wanton destruction and brutality. The new chief of army staff, Major General Abdurahman Dambazau, upon taking office in August 2008, admitted that some officers had become accustomed to “illegal duties” and “involvement in criminal activities.”¹⁶ Many of the main rebel leaders have informants within the military. Sources close to Asari have suggested that he has been given advance warning of impending military operations against his group. Ateke also has paid informants within the security forces. Members of the military are closely involved in bunkering, taking a cut of the profits in return for turning a blind eye to oil theft. An Isekiri informant explained how the process worked:

In 1995, the Ijaw youths who were the major ones involved in bunkering were arrested and taken to Abuja. There, they struck a deal with high level officials of security agencies—Navy, Army and Police, which eventually led to their release. This made them emboldened to begin to carry out this illegitimate business more openly and fearlessly. As the illegitimate business grew, there arose a disagreement over percentage earning between the Ijaw dominated bunkers and the security agencies who had a cut in each supply of oil to illegal buyers. The security agents felt they were being short-changed by these Ijaw bunkerers and had to intermittently stop the illegal operations because of their not being fully remunerated for the oil deals.¹⁷

Keen to shake off their unwanted partners, the Ijaw bunkerers turned to force, supplementing their militia groups with extra weapons and fighters:

The Ijaw dominated bunkerers faced with this challenge now resorted to discussing with their identified international buyers to supply them with sophisticated arms that they could deploy to match the firepower of conventional security forces. Hence, local militia armies of non-state armed actors were formed in the riverine communities to protect bunkering interests.¹⁸

The heavy militarization of the Delta combined with corrupt soldiers’ attempts to muscle in on armed groups’ criminal activities has thus encouraged the militants to embark on a recruiting drive and expand their arsenal. Both sides in the conflict feed off each other, adding further to the instability. Caught in the crossfire are the communities of the Niger Delta, which find themselves terrorized by both sides.

The Realignment of the Armed Groups and the Emergence of MEND

Having examined the origins of many of the Niger Delta's armed groups and further considered their motivations, influences, and how they interact with the society around them, it is now prudent to consider how these various groups came together in recent years and coalesced, at least for a fleeting moment, to form MEND. At the start of 2004, clear distinctions could be made between the situation in Delta and Bayelsa states and that in Rivers. While the first two were relatively peaceful, apart from isolated outbreaks of interethnic violence, Rivers was racked by violence and disorder. The situation in each state is detailed below.

RIVERS STATE

Rivers, the capital of which is Port Harcourt, had become the location of a bitter struggle for control between Ateke Tom and Asari. Both men ran highly organized criminal networks specializing in bunkering and both men also dabbled heavily in political violence, helping to rig the 2003 elections. The two framed their positions in society quite differently, however. While Ateke reveled in his image as a criminal thug, Asari espoused ideological aims, seeing himself as a freedom fighter battling the establishment. He initially sought to do this through the Ijaw Youth Council (IYC), a political organization set up in the late 1990s to promote the Niger Delta peoples' interests. Asari's increasingly militant activities separated him from the mainstream IYC, however, and after his estrangement from his political backers, Governor Odili and Abiye Sekibo, increased his sense of vulnerability, he began erecting his own private militia, which emerged in 2004 as the Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force (NDPVF). The NDPVF became a magnet for other armed groups and soon incorporated elements of the KKK and Greenlanders under its umbrella, along with independent commanders such as Farah Dagogo. It preached greater local control of natural resources and political power; however, it also became embroiled in battles with Ateke and his NDV force over bunkering. Violence between the two groups escalated alarmingly, and in September 2004, Asari's NDPVF raised the stakes dramatically by threatening an all-out war on the oil industry.

The NDPVF's declaration called on all oil companies operating in the Niger Delta to shut down operations by October 1, 2004, threatening a major guerrilla operation grandly titled "Operation Locust Feast" if its terms were not met. Asari's announcement sparked panic in world oil markets—the price of crude shot up to \$50 a barrel, a record at the time. It also caused alarm in Abuja and swift intervention from President Obasanjo. Asari, Ateke, and their respective sets of followers were summoned to a series of meetings in the capital, where they dropped their campaign of violence believing that the federal and state governments would address some of the Niger Delta's fundamental

troubles. An agreement was reached in October that was meant to lead to the disarming and disbanding of both men's militia groups.

Unfortunately, the euphoria that followed the October 2004 peace agreement did not last long. It was undone by the main signatories' bad faith and hijacked by politicians who manipulated the demobilization process for their own ends. Militants who had agreed to disarm on the condition that they receive jobs and benefits found that these had been given to the politicians' clients instead. At the same time, many members grew resentful of their former leaders, who seemed to have enriched themselves from the peace process while immediately falling back into their old habits. One former militant explains how loyalties began to waver:

Ateke started robbing and causing more trouble in the area. Ateke's camp was divided into two because his second-in-command, Soboma George, lost trust for him. He (Soboma) formed his group called Outlaws. On Asari's part, he started woma-nizing too much and not paying those who took him to the top. His camp was divided before he was arrested (in September 2005). This does not mean his boys do not love him. This fight was for supremacy, and who controls the human resource.¹⁹

The months following the collapse of the 2004 peace agreement thus saw a further fragmentation of the armed groups in Rivers State—and a concurrent rise in violence. Ateke's disgruntled number two, Soboma George, formed his own armed group, the Outlaws. Asari also lost many of his followers, including Farah Dagogo, who later gained prominence as head of Eastern MEND and the Niger Delta Strike Force (NDSF).

BAYELSA STATE

Bayelsa State used to be part of Rivers State, and continues to share many common features with it. While the level of political violence in Bayelsa State did not reach the levels seen in Rivers, armed militants who received their training in Port Harcourt did cause some trouble before returning home. The problem was particularly acute in the Southern Ijaw local government area, where militants found it easy to hide out in the spread-out, watery terrain. Boyloaf (Victor Ben) emerged as arguably the most notorious of the Bayelsa militant leaders. He was a successful oil bunkerer who had fought with the NDPVF and subsequently decided to use his combination of networking and fighting skills to establish his own camp. His ascendance owed something to his allegiance with Henry Okah, a well-known arms dealer originally from Bayelsa State.

DELTA STATE

While Rivers State simmered with violence, intrigue, and division between the late 1990s and 2004, the situation was comparatively calm in Delta State. While the history of armed groups in Rivers State was by and large the story of violent street cults engaging in little more than criminality, the unrest in Delta has followed a different course. Many of the divisions in Delta were along ethnic lines, and the state's armed groups emerged out of these rivalries. In the 1990s, the most important group originated from the Ijaw community, where youth leaders formed the Federation of Niger Delta Ijaw Communities (FNDIC). The FNDIC spoke of Ijaw self-determination in the Warri region and de-

clared the oil companies and federal government its enemies. At that time, the Ijaws perceived that the Itsekiris were the main beneficiaries of government and oil company employment and contracts, having taken advantage of their favored status during the colonial era.

The FNDIC had a number of founders, including its president and political spokesman, Chief Dr. Oboko Bello, and its mobilization officer, Chief Government Ekpemupolo. Ekpemupolo, better known as Tom Polo, was the spiritual driving force behind the movement and later emerged as Delta State's dominant militia leader. Tom Polo partially owed his success and influence to the oil companies. He had begun his career working in a legitimate capacity for Shell and Chevron, arranging labor contracts and other civil and engineering services. Local people began to recognize him as an important source of patronage, for he offered access to jobs in the oil business. It was not long, however, before he moved into the bunkering trade and other illicit activities. He was paid protection money to ensure that oil company operations were not disturbed.

With his newly found wealth, Tom Polo helped fund the FNDIC's activities, which soon became the forum for the articulation of community and youth grievances for the whole region and the main advocate for the social and economic liberation of the Ijaw people in their struggle against the Itsekiris. While Oboko Bello was the face of the political struggle, Tom Polo was its military leader, assembling a heavily fortified and highly sophisticated quasi-military complex in the creeks, where he offered arms training for local youths and gathered recruits for the struggle. By 2005, his camps housed a combined militia force of 3,000 armed youths, who efficiently ran his bunkering operations.

MEND: THE DELTA AND RIVERS MILITANTS UNITE

By 2005, there were already signs of contact between the leaders of major militia groups. Asari had, for example, taken refuge in Delta State, fleeing harassment from Ateke at the invitation of Tom Polo. But three high-profile arrests brought the groups together in a formal way. The first was of the governor of Bayelsa State, Chief D.S.P. Alamiyeseigha, on suspicion of corruption. As Bayelsa is the only Ijaw-majority state in Nigeria, the fiercely pro-Ijaw militias there viewed his arrest as a grave insult. That Chief Alamiyeseigha was linked to opponents of President Obasanjo also added to suspicions that his detention was politically motivated. The second major political actor to find himself behind bars was Asari, who in September 2005 was apprehended on charges of treason linked to comments he made calling for the breakup of the Nigerian state. Both his and Alamiyeseigha's arrests were viewed as blatant government provocation and provided a rallying point for all Niger delta militias. The third arrest occurred in Rivers State in November 2005, when government authorities seized Olo, a leader of the KKK. This final catalyzing event prompted, Farah Dagogo and Boyloaf to leave Rivers for the perceived safety of Delta State, and added more broadly to a growing sense insecurity among other militant leaders.

At the invitation of Tom Polo and other senior militants, a series of meetings was convened in late 2005 in Delta State, ostensibly to discuss the incarceration of Alamiyeseigha and Asari. Representatives from FNDIC and the NDPVF were present along with fighters from cult groups including the KKK and Greenlanders. The outcome of these talks was the emergence of a new group—MEND. An agreement was made to start using military force to attack oil installations. Bunkering syndicates were merged and sophisticated heavy weaponry purchased.

MEND's first attack, in December 2005, was a low-key affair. An assault on an oil facility in An-doni, in Rivers State, was repelled. However, the group announced itself in dramatic fashion just

weeks later, when four foreign oil workers were kidnapped in Bayelsa State on January 11, 2006. When the hostage takers, Farah and Boyloaf, took their captives to Tom Polo's camp, a long debate ensued about what to do with them. A list of demands was hurriedly cobbled together and issued six days later. It called for local control of the Niger Delta's oil wealth, the payment of \$1.5 billion dollars by Shell to Bayelsa State to compensate for years of environmental pollution, and the release of Asari and Chief Alamiyeseigha. Following the ransom payment made by Bayelsa State government, the hostages were freed on January 30. By the time of the second set of kidnappings, in February, the demands had been scaled back. Now the call was for the Niger Delta region to receive 50 percent of its oil revenues rather than the 100 percent asked for in the original ultimatum. A MEND statement issued on March 1 focused on four sets of demands for the people of the Niger Delta: increased political participation, increased involvement in the oil and gas industry, socioeconomic development, and reduced militarization of the region.

Things Fall Apart: The Fragmentation of MEND

MEND was never a coherent entity, but rather an umbrella group that contained a constantly shifting lineup of militants. Different groups came together for particular operations before going their own ways again. Almost as soon as it was born, MEND began to unravel. Within a matter of months, the name was virtually meaningless, as three distinct branches of the group emerged in succession: Western MEND in Delta State, Eastern MEND in Rivers State, and Central MEND in Bayelsa State. While the unified group, formed at the end of 2005, appeared to have been a creation of Tom Polo in Delta State, challengers had emerged almost immediately. Greed and personal rivalry played a major part. The original kidnapers, Farah and Boyloaf, soon parted ways with Tom Polo, unhappy that they did not receive a large enough cut of the ransom payments. In March 2006, they both departed for Rivers to develop their burgeoning kidnapping business. Their followers were quick to appreciate the financial opportunities provided by this new criminal enterprise. Farah found a business partner in Soboma, the head of the Outlaws, and the two made a formidable team. Soboma controlled Port Harcourt, while Farah, now the nominal head of Eastern MEND, controlled the surrounding creeks. With all of Rivers State now staked out for kidnapping, the enterprise rapidly expanded. Before long, even the government's hostage negotiators were involved, taking a cut of the ransom for their part in releasing the captives. The government and security agencies showed little desire to stop the hostage taking. Even when the director of Delta State's State Security Services accused the Rivers governor's chief security officer of supporting the hostage takers, the officer was not apprehended. With such lucrative rewards on offer, it was in no one's interest to stop the abductions. Eastern MEND had basically become a kidnapping franchise.

Farah's initial partner, Boyloaf, headed back to Bayelsa State and worked on extending his power base. He cemented his reputation as a violent thug, carrying out a succession of oil worker kidnappings and issuing statements claiming to speak on behalf of MEND, statements which were often contradicted by his former comrades in Delta and Rivers.

It appears that Boyloaf's Bayelsa-based MEND faction had the closest links to the man the outside world has come to incorrectly identify as MEND's "leader," Henry Okah. Originally from Bayelsa State, Okah had in fact lived outside Nigeria for many years, most recently in South Africa, where he worked as an arms dealer. He had supplied arms to militants in the Niger Delta as far back as 2003 and 2004, and continued to do so for MEND and the assortment of groups it encompassed. Although he had not been present at any of the meetings in which MEND was formed, he began to play a prominent role both as a quartermaster and a liaison officer, negotiating between the hostage takers and their captives' representatives. Okah is also thought to have used his influence with Boyloaf to issue statements on behalf of Central MEND, under the pseudonym Jomo Gbomo. While some militants called him "master," he was never universally viewed as the leader of the group. MEND continued to function following his 2007 arrest and deportation to Nigeria in February 2008.

In Delta State, Tom Polo managed to hold onto a sizable chunk of the original MEND group, in spite of the high-profile defections. This was largely thanks to his formidable financial base and position as a kind of spiritual leader for the militants. As one of his followers pointed out, “Tom Polo has been an excellent leader and motivator for the carrying out of the struggle. He is a leader who keeps us in the Camp to enable us appreciate the issues and school us in the art of modern warfare to continue the struggle.”²⁰ While Western MEND indulged in the same criminal activities as its central and eastern franchises, it also retained a nominal commitment to its political aims of self-determination for the Ijaw people. Evidence suggests that while men like Farah and Boyloaf kidnapped purely for money, Western MEND used hostage taking, at least in part, to maintain pressure on President Obasanjo to release Asari and Chief Alamiyeseigha. This aim was achieved following the 2007 elections, when the new president, Umaru Yar’Adua, released both men in the hope it would restore an element of stability to the Niger Delta.

These two notable Ijaws’ release was, however, an isolated political “success” for MEND. Both men had lost much of their relevance in a group that had long since moved from any coherent focus on political struggle to a loose conglomeration of largely criminal gangs. The polished media operation MEND presented to the outside world belied the reality. In fact, careful analysis of MEND statements by a well-informed online news source on the Niger Delta, Chief Oyibo of Oyibosonline,²¹ concluded that they had been written and issued by at least four different people.²² This was not really a unified group at all, and to talk of MEND as a single entity with political goals was too tidy an explanation for what was actually a far more complex and confusing picture.

Where Things Now Stand

“No condition is permanent,” the Nigerians are fond of saying. This observation is particularly relevant to the armed groups of the Niger Delta, which are in a constant state of flux. Militant activity rises and falls from week to week, making attempts to estimate the number of people currently involved with MEND and its affiliated groups difficult. In 2007 it was believed that Tom Polo’s camps contained at least 3,000 militants, each with two weeks of training and two weeks of experience. A recent estimate puts the number at less than 1,000, as many of his boys have gone into full-time bunkering. The estimates of Boyloaf and Farah’s camps vary from 800 to 1,800 and 750 to 1,000, respectively. One reliable source puts the number of youth in the Ateke/Soboma alliance at 4,000 while another estimates that Ateke’s camp alone has 4,000 militants, with an additional 3,000 under Soboma George.²³ These are only the main Ijaw groups though. There are probably thousands of members of other armed groups in the core Niger Delta states that collaborate with MEND on particular operations.

Membership in these groups changes from day-to-day as their leaders forge fresh alliances and enter into disputes with each other. More often than not, the swirl of changing rivalries has as much to do with personal interest as any higher motive. Tracing the relationship between Ateke Tom and Soboma George illustrates this point. As already discussed, Ateke progressed with dizzying speed from small-scale businessman to vigilante leader and oil bunkerer. He acquired the leadership of the Ice-lendo group with the connivance of Soboma’s men and the two men struck up a close working relationship. The partnership turned sour in late 2004 and violent soon afterward. In June 2005, Soboma killed one of Ateke’s closest men, Golden Kalio, in Port Harcourt. Within hours, Ateke’s men had kidnapped and murdered Soboma’s brother. This tit-for-tat killing continued until the middle of 2008 before ending almost as suddenly as it had begun. Ateke and Soboma made peace and joined forces once again.

Such puzzling patterns of alliance formation and rupture are apparent between most of the leading militants, including Asari, Farah, Boyloaf, and Tom Polo. Farah Dagogo was one of Asari’s most loyal commanders in 2003 and 2004, but by March 2005 he had become very critical of Asari. Things changed again in September 2005, when the latter’s arrest brought Farah quickly to his defense. Farah went on to forge a close alliance with Soboma, but the two had become sworn enemies by mid-2008. Ultimately, it is clear that personal interest plays just as important a role in understanding the Niger Delta militias’ motivations as do socioeconomic or political factors.

Policy Implications

PREVIOUS INITIATIVES

The challenges of finding policy solutions for the problems of the Niger Delta should not be underestimated. The Nigerian government is faced with a damaging low-level insurrection fought by a confusing array of highly motivated armed groups, aided in part by a population angered at their continued exclusion from the economic benefits they had been promised when the oil companies moved in. In addition, disruption by militants has forced down oil production by about one million barrels per day have and anything up to 300,000 additional barrels per day through criminal networks with links to members of Nigeria's own security forces and politicians. These are matters of grave concern, both for Nigeria and the United States, which until recently has imported approximately one million barrels of Nigerian oil per day.²⁴ Yet so far, both the domestic and international responses to the problems of the Niger Delta have been halfhearted and ineffective.

In the Niger Delta itself, various peace plans have been negotiated for the individual states, to little effect. The peace agreement reached in Rivers State in 2004 fell apart, mainly because the disarmament process was flawed and there was insufficient political will to make it succeed. The author played a role in bringing the militant leaders, Asari and Ateke, to meet with President Obasanjo in Abuja in October 2004 and then went to Rivers State to help consolidate the peace agreement. There was a federal government committee, chaired by Governor Odili, that oversaw the disarmament process. Unfortunately, the committee decided to pay cash for weapons, which was simply used to purchase more weapons. The author also worked with the Rivers State Rehabilitation Committee, which was set up to help the transition militants back to normal life. While the first few technical skills-training programs to emerge from this process were focused on the ex-militants, the programs were gradually taken over by the politicians, who used them as a source of patronage for their friends and relatives.²⁵ While the 2004 Rivers State peace agreement broke down due to broken promises on the part of government, the current governor of Rivers State has refused to engage in a peace process at all. Chibuike Rotimi Amaechi has said that he will not negotiate with "criminals." Instead, more soldiers have been sent to the area, with mixed results.

In Bayelsa State, the peace process that began in December 2007 was a sham. The major signatory is the head of Central MEND, Boyloaf, who has simply carried on with business as usual. Although he and his friends have maintained relative peace in Bayelsa State, they have engaged in violence elsewhere, such as the summer 2008 attack on Bonga and their participation in the oil war in Rivers State in September 2008. Until recently, the state government's strategy involved paying both the militants and the military to maintain the peace within its borders. In spring 2009, Governor Timipre Sylva announced that he would no longer pay the militants.

By contrast, the peace process in Delta State has been moderately successful. A waterways security committee, established in May 2007, includes members of some militant groups and has managed to

alleviate some of the violence in the region. In addition, several youth leaders have been offered positions in the state government.

At the federal level, there has been plenty of talk and some new initiatives but little in the way of concrete results. The Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC), set up by former president Obasanjo, was from the outset mired in corruption and undermined by incompetence. President Yar'Adua established a technical committee in late 2008 to study all previous reports on the Niger Delta and plan a strategy. Its findings are now in the hands of another committee for further consideration. The president also established a ministry of the Niger Delta in December 2008 and appointed two ministers to deal specifically with the problems of the region. It is too early to judge these initiatives' effectiveness.

Turning to the international level, the Gulf of Guinea Energy Security Strategy, (GGESS) established between Nigeria and the United States in 2005, marked an attempt to address the major issues affecting energy supplies in the region as a whole, including the lack of economic development and the problems of bunkering and money laundering. The GGESS was later expanded to include the United Kingdom, Canada, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Norway, and France, but it has been hampered by the unreliability of its local partner in Nigeria, the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC). The United States has given Nigeria tracking equipment in the hope of improving maritime security in the Gulf of Guinea and cracking down on the bunkering problem, but there is little to show for this initiative. The United Nations (UN) Secretariat has said it is willing to set up a committee of experts to examine the problem of "blood oil"—the term used to describe the misery caused by oil bunkering—but is awaiting a formal request from Nigeria.

At the oil company level, a major international energy firm operating in Nigeria has said it will offer fingerprinting technology to the Nigerian government to help its efforts to trace stolen oil. The technique uses chemical analysis precise enough to identify the field from which the oil originated. It can even pick out small quantities of Nigerian oil that have been mixed in with oil from another source. There appears to be no good reason why the Nigerian government cannot use this technology to monitor the movement of blood oil.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Finding a solution to the problem of armed groups in the Niger Delta requires coordinated action by the Nigerian government, the United States, and other international partners. Nigeria should

- *Clamp down on criminal activities, including oil bunkering, illegal arms importation, money laundering, and political thuggery.* This does not mean repeating the blunt military attacks of mid-May 2009, in which hundreds of innocent women, children, and elderly people were caught in the crossfire. Rather, the criminal activities that support and encourage militancy must be stopped. The militants must be denied an easy path back into crime. The government must not turn a blind eye to bunkering. It must pursue and prosecute members of the military who are involved in the illegal trade. Nigeria should accept offers of international help in tracking down the criminal networks, some of them led by foreign nationals, who direct bunkering operations. It should cooperate with international efforts to track down and apprehend vessels suspected of trafficking stolen oil, possibly accepting offers of assistance to improve maritime security. It should be more willing to share intelligence and work with nations where spot markets are based, encouraging them to play their part

in cracking down on bunkering. In addition, there should be serious efforts made to go after the corrupt political figures who form and maintain armed groups for political violence.

- *Give the people of the Niger Delta more control over their resources.* Reforming Nigeria's Land Use Act, so that more money from oil production in the Niger Delta stays in the Delta, would remove one of the main grievances of the armed groups and the ordinary people who sympathize with them. However, this must be done in a way that guarantees that the money gets down to the people and is not siphoned off by corrupt politicians at the state and local government levels. Several recommendations have been made for directly giving residents of all communities affected by the oil industry a stake in the oil and gas production that affects their region so strongly. Residents would have a better reason to safeguard oil facilities if they had a greater sense of ownership of the industry. In addition, the federal government should keep its promise to improve the economic well-being of people in the Niger Delta and improve the woefully inadequate infrastructure of the region.
- *Reform the security services.* The military has too often been a hindrance rather than a help in the Niger Delta. The complaint of over-militarization in the Niger Delta is valid. Soldiers should be properly trained and paid and concerted efforts should be made to tackle corruption. Local youths could be used for pipeline surveillance, under the supervision of their communities.
- *Secure the borders* to stem the flow of illegal arms into the country. Special attention should be paid to Lagos port, where many of the weapons arrive.
- *Begin an effective disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration process for armed groups.* In return for handing in their weapons, militants should be offered real incentives to rejoin society and forsake their pasts—such as jobs, training, and the opportunity to earn a living. The government should set up a Niger Delta works program to provide jobs in construction and development projects for former members of armed groups. State governments should work with the major oil companies to offer training schemes for skilled jobs and contracting opportunities in the oil and gas industry. The demobilization process should be strictly followed, with a census taken of all militants, and their reintegration into society should be closely monitored. Under the terms of reintegration, an amnesty for past crimes will be necessary because it will be impossible to prosecute all those who have been involved in militant activity, including their military and political backers. The DDR process should be supervised by a neutral body, preferably the UN.
- *Offer counseling to militants to ease their transition back into society.* This would include help for individuals suffering from psychological trauma and drug addiction. Militants' families—many of whom will be reluctant to accept them back—should also be offered help and support. Their communities will also need security assistance to prevent any flare-ups of violence as the reintegration process takes place.
- *Establish a compact with the people of the Niger Delta.* This would be very constructive in building a mutual commitment toward peace, security, and development between the government and the people of the Niger Delta.

The United States and other international partners should

- *Engage more with Nigeria.* The United States should press the Nigerian government to do more to address the problems of the Niger Delta by making it clear that it regards the situation as a concern for international security. The United States needs an official diplomatic presence in the Niger

Delta, an area that is, after all, of growing strategic importance as a major energy supplier. By opening a consular office in the region, the United States would be able to monitor its problems more effectively and build alliances with civil society groups. The United States should consider appointing a special envoy to the Niger Delta.

- *Engage with bilateral and multilateral partners in a diplomatic push.* The United States should seek to build an international consensus on policies to help the Niger Delta. It should revive a revised and more effective Gulf of Guinea Energy Security Strategy and work closely with the UN, the World Bank, and other organizations engaged with Nigeria.
- *Help Nigeria tackle bunkering.* The United States should help Nigeria improve security along its coastline by helping to train a professional, well-equipped coast guard. It should offer technical assistance to trace stolen oil and tackle money laundering. It should name and shame identified sponsors of bunkering operations, place travel bans on offenders, and freeze any U.S. assets they may have.
- *Work with international companies operating in Nigeria to ensure that good corporate governance is practiced.* The suspicion remains among many in the Niger Delta that some oil companies have sponsored armed groups to intimidate host communities, and that by hiring teams to conduct pipeline surveillance, they may have unwittingly aided the formation of armed groups.
- *Promote good governance in Nigeria.* The United States should remind the government in Abuja that the situation in the Niger Delta will never improve while people do not trust their politicians or the security forces or have faith in the electoral process. The United States should urge Nigeria to make the fight against corruption its top priority.
- *Promote revenue transparency in Nigeria.* The United States should work with Nigeria in building institutions to monitor the movement of resources and the fair allocation of revenues. The Niger Delta will remain unstable as long as its people believe that their resources are being misallocated or stolen from them.
- *Be serious about development.* The United States should be helping to develop the major infrastructural projects and job training programs the Niger Delta needs, rather than the token projects currently undertaken. Assistance should come in the form of technical help, rather than money. The United States should offer support for civil society groups to monitor the performance of their elected officials.

Conclusion

The armed groups of the Niger Delta pose an immense challenge to policymakers. They have been a well-established feature of life in the region for decades, they feed off the wider community's genuine grievances, and their motives and objectives are wide-ranging and often in conflict. Furthermore, the focus of their anger—the oil industry—is virtually defenseless in the face of their attacks. With endless miles of undefended oil pipelines crisscrossing the Niger Delta, militants are able to commit acts of sabotage and oil theft at will. The sheer multitude of armed groups adds another layer of complexity. Identifying the groups and trying to decipher what they want is an immensely difficult task because of their nebulous structure and ever-shifting allegiances. Each group has a specific history and the picture varies greatly from state to state. While most are involved in criminal activities such as oil bunkering, arms dealing, and kidnapping, many also regard themselves as freedom fighters and have overtly political aims.

The situation on the ground changes by the day. January 2009 began with talk of a diplomatic breakthrough as two of the leading militants, Soboma and Ateke, spoke of their wish for a peace deal with the government. By the end of the month, the tone had drastically changed following a military attack on one of their camps in Rivers State. This was followed by the murders of the leaders of two major armed groups, apparently by one of the militants who had been calling for a peace deal. In May 2009, Ateke was once again calling for a peace agreement and amnesty to be overseen by a neutral international body. It appears that Tom Polo was also one of the inspirations behind the promise by the Federal Government of Nigeria to grant an amnesty for the militants. In early June 2009, the military carried out a number of fierce attacks on the camps of Tom Polo and other militant leaders in Delta and Rivers State. A government committee has also completed its recommendations for the amnesty promised to the militants by President Yar'Adua in April. It remains to be seen whether the militants accept the amnesty, and if so under what conditions, or if strikes against oil facilities accelerate.

Confronted by such a complicated, ever-changing picture, the Nigerian government has proved itself unable to fashion a coherent response. Not only has it failed to demobilize the armed groups, it has failed to address the range of socioeconomic grievances that lie behind their formation and continued appeal. It has done little to provide jobs, improve the infrastructure, clean up the environment, tackle corruption, or address security fears. Instead, a clique of politicians and military officials have sequestered the lion's share of the region's wealth and squandered it. Until the federal government begins dealing with these deep-seated problems, there seems little prospect of the armed groups laying down their weapons.

Yet insecurity in the Niger Delta is a problem not only for the Nigerian government. It is a problem for the United States and the wider world as well. It is in the United States' interest to improve its energy security and reduce the flow of arms, illicit oil, and illegal money transfers from Nigeria. A stable Niger Delta producing a steady supply of oil would also help to moderate world oil prices. It is

therefore imperative that the United States and other international partners offer Nigeria all the help it needs to confront its armed groups. Because one thing is clear: allowing the problem to fester will be a recipe for further violence, instability, and energy insecurity.

Endnotes

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1. This data comes from research conducted between July 2007 and September 2007 by Academic Associates PeaceWorks (AAPW), of which the author is the founder and executive director. The research, which has not been published, was commissioned by Delta State government as the basis for the state's disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration process.
 2. See T.A. Imobighe, Celestine O. Bassey, and Judith Burdin Asuni, *Conflict and Instability in the Niger Delta: The Warri Case* (Abuja: Academic Associates Peaceworks, 2002).
 3. Dokubo Asari was born into a well-placed Christian family, studied a number of different political ideologies, and appears to have chosen Islam for its principles. His Muslim affiliation does not indicate any linkage with any Islamic terrorist group. In fact, in a private conversation with the author in October 2004, Asari commented that he was rethinking his commitment to Islamic practices.
 4. The data in this section comes from research conducted in 2006 and 2007 by AAPW. It was presented in an unpublished study titled *Explaining the Phenomena of Ethnic Militias, Cult Groups, Drug Trafficking and Consumption in Nigeria's Niger Delta: Case Studies of Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Delta, Ondo and Rivers State*.
 5. An update of the 2006 and 2007 studies was conducted by AAPW staff in August 2008.
 6. There is a prominent debate in the resource conflict literature between rebel greed and rebel grievance theories of war onset. For a discussion of these hypotheses, please see Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffle, "Greed and Grievance in Civil War," *Oxford Economic Papers* 56, p. 4 (2004); Mats R. Berdal and David M. Malone, eds., *Greed and Grievance: Economic Agendas and Civil War* (Boulder, Colorado: Rienner, 2000); and Karen Ballentine and Jake Sherman, eds. *The Political Economy of Armed Conflict: Beyond Greed and Grievance* (Boulder, Colorado: Rienner, 2003).
 7. AAPW compiled biographical information of both current and former militants. Their identities are concealed for their protection. This information is from an interview with Respondent 3.
 8. Respondent 2, AAPW interview.
 9. Respondent 3, AAPW interview.
 10. Casi renounced cultism and violence in 2002 and became a peace campaigner. He was murdered in 2007 by a member of his former group's rival gang.
 11. Respondent 2, AAPW interview.
 12. Respondent 3, AAPW interview.
 13. Respondent 17, AAPW interview.
 14. Al-Jazeera interview, April 20th 2007.
 15. Human Rights Watch, "Criminal Politics: Violence, 'Godfathers,' and Corruption in Nigeria," vol. 19, no. 16 (October 2007), p. 84.
 16. Kingsley Omonobi, "Nigeria: New Service Chiefs Take Over Command of Armed Forces," *Vanguard*, August 28, 2008.
 17. Respondent 17, AAPW interview.
 18. Respondent 17, AAPW interview.
 19. Respondent 3, APPW interview.
 20. Respondent 18, AAPW interview.
 21. Private discussion with Chief Oyibo, January 2009.
 22. In a September 2008 private discussion with the Western MEND spokesman about the promised ceasefire, he commented that the other spokesman, presumably Boyloaf, had no authority to make such a promise. This reflects the varying opinions among the various MEND factions.
 23. Unnamed grassroots informants, May 2009.
 24. According to the Energy Information Administration, the United States imported 13.9 million barrels of oil from Nigeria in February 2009, the latest month where figures are available. This compared with 29.7 million barrels in the same month in 2008.
 25. The Niger Delta Peace and Security Background Papers contain a chapter on the Rivers State peace agreement, including the role of Academic Associates PeaceWorks in the DDR process.

About the Author

Judith Burdin Asuni is a visiting scholar for African studies at Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies.