

Full Length Research Paper

The Niger Delta crisis: Issues, challenges and prospects

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Accepted 12 May, 2009

Nigeria's Niger Delta region is not only home to the greater part of Africa's largest mangrove forest, but also the source of Nigeria's oil wealth. Here, in this amazing network of creeks, and an aquatic splendor comprising marine, brackish and freshwater ecosystems, lie the operational bases of a kaleidoscope of ethnic militia and insurgent organizations dedicated to the socio-economic emancipation of the Niger Delta peoples. These have culminated in the Niger Delta Crisis. Thus, the area has become a hot bed of violence, insurgency, kidnapping, hostage-taking, oil pipeline sabotage, crude oil theft, gang wars, internecine struggles and so much else by way of anarchy and chaos. Making use of library research and content analysis methodologies, the paper detailed in a systematic manner the real issues involved in the struggle, from the perspectives of the Nigerian State, the Niger Delta communities, and the oil Companies. The paper identified and analysed the major challenges posed by this crisis to the Nigerian State. It concluded that in spite of the continuing deterioration of the crisis into anarchy, terror and a revolving criminality, and the militarization of the region by the Nigerian state, the conflict can still be amicably resolved. It recommended among other things that the commitment of government to infrastructural development of the region and corporate social responsibility would bring enduring peace and stability.

Key words: Niger Delta, oil wealth, ethnic militia, content analysis, corporate social responsibility.

INTRODUCTION

The area which is described as the Niger Delta region of Nigeria lies between latitudes 4° and 6° north of the Equator and 4° and 8° east of the Greenwich. It comprises the states of Akwa Ibom, Cross River, Edo, Imo, Rivers, Bayelsa, Delta, Abia and Ondo, making it coterminous with all of Nigeria's oil producing states. Stretching over 20,000 km² of swamp land in the litoral fringes of the country, it embraces one of the world's largest wetlands, over 60% of Africa's largest mangrove forests, and one of the worlds' most extensive (Eyinla and Ukpo, 2006).

Comprising mainly of a distinct aquatic environment

which embraces marine, brackish and fresh water ecosystems, it encompasses the most extensive fresh water swamp forest in West and Central Africa, and manifests an intricate network of creeks, rivers, streams, swamps, braided streams and Oxbow lakes, besides a stretch of flat and fertile land mass.

In this picturesque basin lives a kaleidoscope of ethnic nationalities which include among others, the Ijaw, Itsekiri, Urhobo, Ikwere, Andoni Efik, Ibibio, Kalabari, Okrika, together with sections of the Yoruba and Igbo. Among these, the Ijaw seems by far the largest. In this region also lies Nigeria's over 35 billion barrels of proven oil reserves (Eyinla and Ukpo, 2006), besides an even larger deposit of natural gas. The region also accounts for over 80% of Nigeria's Gross Domestic Product and represents the economic jugular of the country.

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Here in this intricate network of creeks and braided streams also lie the operational bases of a plethora of ethnic militia and insurgent groups of various kinds, with differing goals and objectives ranging from nationalism and freedom fighting to criminality and terrorism. This region is therefore Nigeria's hot bed of ethnic violence, terrorism and insurgency. But in the midst of unchecked violence and a revolving criminality, together with the resultant widespread anxiety to douse tension and appease the militants, the real issues seem to have been forgotten, and prescribed solutions rendered puerile.

This paper sets out to revisit and highlight the real issues involved in the struggle, and to analyse the true challenges that confront the Nigerian State. And deriving from this, to point out some ways to an amicable solution which alone can form the foundation for a genuine reconciliation, and sustainable development and peace through corporate social responsibility.

Conceptual clarification

It is pertinent at this stage, to attempt a clarification of two important concepts which are germane to the understanding and explication of our current subject. These are the concepts of sustainable development and corporate social responsibility.

Sustainable development

The concept of sustainable development is related to the need for the institutionalization of best business practices by companies, corporations and sundry business concerns as well as governments in processes of production, distribution and consumption, vis-à-vis their economic, socio-political and environmental spheres of activity. According to World Development Report (2003), sustainability is an evolving framework. It stated that societies will continue to transform over time and since significant social stress and crisis is likely to lead to a breakdown in the development and preservation of all assets, intergenerational well-being is bound to be jeopardized. Thus for any given technology and knowledge resource base, there are some utilization rates that cannot be sustained. It is therefore necessary for such unsustainable rates to be highlighted as a guide to corporate decision makers who may thus be enabled to change their course towards sustainability.

Sustainable development has been described as that development that meets the needs and aspirations of the present generations, without compromising the ability to meet the need of future generations. Sustainable development strategy may therefore be seen as facilitator for balancing the conservation of nature's resources with the need for industrial and technological development and advancement put differently, it connotes the capacity to improve the quality of human life while living within the carrying capacity of the supporting ecosystem (Agagu,

2008).

Corporate social responsibility

The concept of corporate social responsibility embraces the notion that organizations have moral, ethical and philanthropic responsibilities in addition to their usual responsibility to earn a fair return for investors, and comply with the law (Carrol and Bucholtz, 2003). It requires corporate organizations to embrace a broader view of their responsibilities to include not only stock holders but also stake holders.

The concept is closely related to the call in the 1960s and 1970s by civil rights movements and environmentalists as well as consumer societies for large scale business organizations to take on greater responsibilities. It is based on the idea that corporate organizations should: Cease to cause societal problems and start to participate in solving societal problems. In this perspective, business organizations were expected to; apart from paying attention to business related responsibilities such as equal employment opportunities, product safety and the environment, also voluntarily participate in solving societal problems, whether they had caused the problems or not. Corporate social responsibility requires that corporations should go beyond their economic and legal responsibilities, and embrace new responsibilities related to ennoblement of society. This is the prevailing view in much of the world today.

Some basic contextual considerations

The armed struggle, internecine conflict and insurgency in the Niger Delta, all of which have been subsumed under the general term; Niger Delta crisis, may be seen in three basic dimensions. As has been mentioned earlier in the paper, the Niger Delta region is a pot-pouri of ethnic nationalities. These ethnic groups, while subscribing to a general interest in the development of the Niger Delta, nevertheless manifest inclinations towards more specific primordial interests. The bloody Ijaw-Itsekiri war for instance cannot be understood within the framework of environmental degradation or oil exploration in the region. It is therefore necessary to classify the real issues involved in the conflict.

First among these is the Ijaw national struggle for self-determination. This is a struggle that was spearheaded in the 1960s by the late Ijaw patriot, Isaac Adaka Boro. This struggle is on-going, and is aimed at building a strong and independent Ijaw nation. This is perhaps the spirit behind the Kaiama declaration, the formation of the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), as the military arm of the Ijaw national congress (INC), and the unity and co-operation among the various militant groups whose membership are drawn almost exclusively from the Ijaw nationality.

The second dimension relates to the various bands of

criminal cult gangs established, encouraged and funded by political godfathers and dedicated to the theft of crude oil, kidnapping for ransom, assassination of political opponents, various acts of brigandage and piracy in the creeks, and upon the territorial sea. These also have and maintain their political connections at all levels of government and the military. It was to the activities of these that the Governor of Rivers State, Rotimi Amaechi, referred when he lamented at the recent Vanguard Newspapers organized South-South legislative retreat on constitution review in 2008, that;

The attempt by Militants to hijack the Niger Delta Struggle was proving increasingly counter-productive to the region's overall interest, as their indiscriminate killings, kidnapping activities and attacks on oil and other business facilities have made the entire area unsafe for legitimate business to thrive;...while the sustained campaign and struggle to reverse the prevalent injustice against Niger Delta people enjoys the support and blessing of most well meaning people in and outside the country, any criminal variant of this, expressed in the form of militant activities, would certainly erode the nobility of the cause (Briggs, 2008).

In a communique issued in August 2008 by participants in a South-South legislative retreat on constitution review, the participants who included all State Governors in the Niger Delta stated that;

The retreat reviewed the agitation for justice and equity in the Niger Delta and condemned the corruption of genuine agitation by criminal elements that minimize the aspirations of the people through kidnapping, hostage taking and armed robbery, as these are acts that are destroying the economy of the region. These criminal acts distract from the just struggle for better access to the resources of the region, as hoodlums with no idea of the nature of the problems in the zone are latching on the legitimate struggle to cause mayhem which are in the main, counter-productive to the cause of the Niger Delta (The Vanguard, August 15, 2008).

These hoodlums are by no means the only groups that are latching on to the legitimate struggle for development in the Niger Delta. The various Ijaw based militant groups are doing the same thing for the attainment of political goals.

The third dimension in the struggle consists of those who are genuinely concerned with the struggle for the actualization of a truly developed Niger Delta, free from poverty, degradation, unemployment, environmental pollution, economic and socio-political alienation, disease and squalor. These are of course neither militants nor insurgents. They are mainly members of the intelligentsia, political and economic elites, as well as enlightened traditional institutions. But most especially the enlightened middle class citizens of the Niger Delta. There is there-

fore no militant or military wing of the true Niger Delta Struggle. According to Governor Uduaghan of Delta State;

I have always emphasized during our meetings in Abuja that whatever they want to do...please do it on the basis of ethnic nationality because there is no one who speak on behalf of the Ijaw man. Neither can another ethnic group speak on behalf of the Isoko, Urhobo, Itsekiri, Efik, and Ibibio (The Nation, 2008).

There is no doubt that all the ethnic nationalities in the region are equal stakeholders in the Niger Delta imbroglio. Yet there is no militant group collectively put together by these nationalities as a bloc, and no militant group manifests a representative profile, as virtually all the active militant groups are almost exclusively Ijaws, which within this context can speak for no one, or fight for no one but themselves. The genuine and true struggle for economic and socio-political emancipation of the Niger Delta peoples therefore, is yet to assume a militant posture.

Conceptual framework for analysis

In the specific situation of our current subject, the quest for emancipation which lies at the heart of the Niger Delta struggle, is not as yet directed towards secession or excision from the Nigerian State but merely a protest against criminal neglect, marginalisation, oppression and environmental degradation as well as economic and socio-political hopelessness, and in one word, frustration, in the oil bearing and contiguous communities of the Niger Delta. Our preferred organizing device for this analysis therefore is the frustration-aggression theory.

The frustration-aggression theory

The basis of the Frustration-Aggression theory is found in the works of John Dollard (a psychologist) and his associates, in their pioneering work on the subject (Dollard et al., 1939), and in the later research work carried out by Leonard Berkowitz (1980-89). Political Scientists who have employed this approach as a general basis for the explanation of political violence are, among others: James C. Davios, Ted Gurr, Ivo and Rosalind Feierabend, and Douglas BWY (Midlarsky, 1975). Further reviews of this theory were undertaken or used in various studies by Zillman (1979), Dill and Anderson (1995) and Maire (2004) among others.

This theory presents the idea of relative deprivation as a perceived disparity between value expectation and value capabilities. Or the lack of a need satisfaction defined as a gap between aspiration and achievement (Midlarsky, 1975). Simply put, when there is a gap between the level of value expectation and the level of value attainment, due to lack of capability to establish a congruence between both levels, tension builds up due to the pres-

sure of an unfulfilled aspiration or an unsatisfied urge or need. This, when not arrested in time, leads to frustration. Frustration, when it builds up, leads to the rising up of suppressed emotions of anger, which is often directed against the party considered to be the source of deprivation of satisfaction. This strong emotion finally finds an outlet through aggressive and invariably violent disposition towards the environment.

Berkowitz (1988) demonstrated that men are most inclined to aggress when subjected to unjustified frustration, and drew a distinction between attitudinal aggression and behavioural aggression as direct results of sustained frustration. For Gurr (1970) the potential for collective violence varies strongly with the intensity and scope of relative deprivation among members of a collectivity. If there is a significant discrepancy between what they think they deserve and what they think they will get, there is a likelihood of rebellion. Just as frustration produces aggressive behaviour on the part of an individual, so does relative deprivation predict collective violence by social groups (Maire, 2004).

The armed insurrection against military and civilian targets in the Niger Delta, by militant youths, directed against government and the foreign oil companies is viewed in this perspective. The fact that frustration invariably leads to aggression is already amply demonstrated in the Middle East by Palestinians against the State of Israel, in apartheid South Africa by the ANC and other liberation movements, and in Northern Ireland by the IRA, among so many others.

One is not unmindful here of the problems and limitations of the frustration–aggression thesis, such as the fact that an aggressive response to frustration may be dependent upon the individual's level of tolerance. Or the fact that frustration need not lead to aggression or that aggression need not always be negative and violent, but could also be positive and constructive. However, it is an established fact that frustration does produce a temporary increase in motivation, and thus lead to more vigorous responses (Bandura and Walters, 1963). And this is perceived to be of sufficient generality to provide a basis for the explanation of virtually all forms of aggressive behaviour, including political violence. This is probably why Maire (2004,) argued that; "Men who are frustrated have an innate disposition to do violence to its source in proportion to the intensity of their frustration..." This is of course a most apposite description of the situation, in the Oil bearing and contiguous communities of Nigeria's Niger Delta region.

THE NIGER DELTA CRISIS: THE ISSUES

Environmental degradation and poverty escalation

Before the advent of commercial oil production in the Niger Delta about fifty years ago (in 1958), the region was essentially a pristine environment which supported substantial subsistence resources for the mostly sedentary

populations. These included among other things, medicinal herbs and barks, fish and shrimp, crabs and clams, wood for energy and shelter, as well as a stable soil for farming and habitat for exotic wildlife. There was the Delta elephant, the white crested monkey, the river hippopotamus, as well as a colorful array of exotic birds, crocodiles, turtles and alligators. The region also accounted for a large percentage of Nigeria's commercial fisheries industry.

Oil prospecting activities however are associated with the destruction of vegetation, farmlands and human settlements to allow for seismic cutting lines. Severe environmental hazards associated with this activity include destruction of fish and some other forms of aquatic life, both marine and freshwater around the prospecting sites. Noise pollution and vibration from seismographic blasting also affects buildings, fence walls, wooden bridges and access roads. When the impact occurs, as has become routine in the Niger Delta, there is usually no attempt to rectify the damages done to the environment, health and social well-being of the people and ecosystem. No compensation whatsoever is considered (Eyinla and Ukpo, 2006).

Oil drilling operations further pollute the underground water. Through a variety of unethical practices in drilling, more fish and fauna are destroyed, farming and fishing grounds polluted by toxic waste materials. Also in the production process, waste water is discharged from major production terminals together with other contaminants like sludge from storage tanks, oil debris, gaseous pollutants and sanitary wastes. More of these toxic wastes are released into the already heavily polluted environment during the process of oil refining, during which process several chemicals and pollutants such as hydrogen sulphide, oil and grease, ammonia and toxic heavy metals are discharged into the environment.

The process involved in petroleum resources distribution also include disruption of the sea bed by dredging activities for pipeline installation beside malfunctioning flow stations and other oil installations. Sedimentation also occurs along pipeline channels, besides pollution from tank washing, deck drainage and loading operations. The routine destruction of environmentally sensitive regions like the lowlands, wetlands, fish ponds and farmlands are the regular features. Also involved in this is general land degradation and loss of soil fertility.

In addition to these are the problems associated with the oil spillage caused by blow-outs, corrosion, equipment failure, operational error and pipeline vandalism. Other causes of oil spillage include weakness of legislative control and enforcement of regulations, the callous nature of the operations of oil companies which are often shrouded in secrecy. According to Eyinla and Ukpo (2006), It will be correct to indicate that the greatest single environmental problem associated with the petroleum industry in contemporary Nigeria, result from off-shore and on-shore oil spillage.

It is estimated that in over 40 years of oil exploration

and production in Nigeria, over 60,000 spills have been recorded, and over 2,000,000 barrels were discharged into the regions eco-system from oil spillages alone between 1976 and 1996. In 1997 and 1998, Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC) spilled 106,000 from its installations at Jones creek alone. In January 1998, Mobil recorded its worst spillage at the Idoho offshore site which spread within 30 days from Akwa-Ibom to Lagos.

Within the first months of 2008 alone, Nigeria recorded 418 cases of oil spills. According to the Minister of Environment, Mrs. Halima Alao:

This portends a great danger to us as a nation, and particularly to the environment and the social and economic well being of our people (Vanguard, 2008).

This is however a gross understatement of the severe implications of oil spillage to the region. According to Eyinla and Ukpo (2006), there are several specific impacts of oil spills relating to the destruction of the wetlands. These include loss of fish, crustaceans and other aquatic resources, loss of livelihood through loss of fishing grounds and gears, wildlife migration, destruction of farmlands, reduced agricultural productivity and yield, displacement of inhabitants, spread of water borne epidemics, to mention a few. All of these translate to hunger, grinding poverty and disease where there are neither hospitals nor herbal remedies which have in the mean time been rendered impotent by oil production.

In addition, the innumerable gas flares which dot the Niger Delta landscape waters produce heat and light on a continuous basis, day and night. Not only can fish and fauna not breed under such conditions, they are also forced to migrate to more suitable waters elsewhere in the West African coast. Gas flaring is also associated with atmospheric and thermal pollution and the depletion of vegetation and wild life. According to Eyinla and Ukpo (2006), damages to buildings, acid rain formation, depletion of floral periodicity, discomfort to humans and danger of pulmonary disease epidemic are other environmental problems arising from gas flaring. The soil, rivers and creeks of Niger Delta, which used to be alkaline in nature 17-40 years ago, have now, become dangerously acidic.

Failed expectations

In line with socio-economic practices in oil bearing communities worldwide, but especially in more advanced civilizations, discovery and exploitations of oil was always a welcome development for the inhabitants of such communities. The hope and initial excitement in the Niger Delta that they would automatically be entitled to benefits that come with being oil producing communities, was therefore legitimate. Oil discovery has brought hope that civilized and modern infrastructure such as electricity, pipe borne water, primary and secondary schools, well-equipped hospitals, better and more modern equipments for exploitation of the region's fish and fauna will become

available. There would at last be roads leading through and linking the communities with the rest of the country.

There was also the expectation that as oil companies begin to carry out their operations and implement the ideas embodied in their corporate social responsibility, more people would have the opportunity of gainful employment. But in the context of prolonged denials and frustrations, neither the oil companies nor government seem to have come to terms with these pervasive social expectations.

One of the most debilitating disappointments was with human capital development. In order to get basic education, the youths have to leave their homes in the creeks to live with relatives and friends in upland communities, most of who often treat them as servants or even beggars. When they eventually get education to tertiary levels, most of them are unable to return to their homeland except as aggrieved and embittered citizens. They had in the process witnessed how the resources of their ancestral lands are exploited and carted away to develop other communities in the country, while their people bear the brunt of this official theft in the form of environmental degradation, political disenfranchisement, social dislocation and economic despoliation

They are forced to witness how oil companies provide state-of-the art facilities for the comfort of their employees, most of whom are foreigners to their land, without adequate consideration for the needs of their hosts, even when doing so is relatively cheap and feasible. They are for instance, only willing to build roads, if such would open-up new and lucrative oil fields. They are able to generate electricity to power their numerous sites within the communities, without bothering to link their immediate hosts to the same grid, even when it is cost-effective to do so.

Confronted by the stark realities of unemployment in their homelands, even after getting education abroad, there seems to be only one choice open to them - take and sell the resources available, directly from the pipelines if necessary. Hence the incidence of pipeline vandalism, illegal bunkering, and their local imperatives of gun running, cult-gang building and militancy as defence mechanisms (Eyinla and Ukpo (2006) put this succinctly:

A popular stand-up comedian once placed the entire scenario...in satirical perspective when he insisted that youths are up in arms against government and multi-national oil companies...because they are tired of being told that "something good is in the pipeline" for them. Rather than wait any further for those promises to materialize, the youths are taking it upon themselves to break open oil pipelines in order to redeem the benefits promised! (emphasis mine).

Political subjugation and internal colonialisation

One of the major political attractions of the oil revenue in Nigeria is that, it brings huge advantages and opportuni-

ties to those who hold the reins of political power, and through its hostility to those excluded from it, systematically and effectively disenfranchises the hoi-pol-loi, stripping them also of basic human rights. Since state officials manipulate and monopolise oil policy and revenue to the exclusion of others, especially the oil bearing communities, frequent frictions and disagreements become inevitable.

By giving the government the impression that they are victims of lawlessness in matters where they are themselves the *Casus belli*, the companies are surreptitiously and deliberately contributing to the appalling human rights situation in the Niger Delta. Through the provision of logistical and infrastructural support to the coercive arms of government, they clearly demonstrate that as far as the oil region is concerned, the infrastructure of oil and repression are closely linked, in such a way that power and repression flows simultaneously, from both the barrel of the gun and the barrel of crude oil (Eyinla and Ukpo, 2006).

Perhaps nothing typifies the state of socio-political subjugation of the Niger Delta peoples better than what has come to be known as the "privatization of the state". This phenomenon is evident in; the large number of military and paramilitary personnel guarding oil facilities, prerogative of oil companies to request the military and the police to quell community disturbances, and turning their areas of operation into garrisoned enclaves. Through creating excessive concern about security, the oil companies reinforce coercion, and violent subjugation.

The communities complain about government attitude of treating the region as a colonial enclave, whose resources they plunder with impunity. They decry the use by political elites, of their oil resources to develop other regions of the country, to the total exclusion of the lands of the oil producing ethnic minorities. And this form of internal colonialism, they find intolerable and unacceptable.

The challenges

The grave implications of continued conflict in the Niger Delta may be better appreciated against the background of the fact that, from historical experience, the Nigerian nation and especially the Niger Delta have had a prolonged familiarity with social struggle against colonial rule. The Niger Delta militants are drawing from this experience in prosecuting the current phase of confrontation with the Nigerian State. Like the struggle against colonialism, the present phase of the crisis has incubated over long periods of unaddressed grievances and disenchantments among communities in the region.

Today, emphasis is shifting from mere bread-and-butter issues to serious questions by the people of the region, regarding their status, role and place within the larger Nigerian polity (Ukeje, 2004). Their agitations have provoked trenchant clamours for greater fiscal allocation and resource control, fiscal federalism and minority rights. These agitations are also leading to more pungent ques-

tions about citizenship, rights, duties and obligations and the moral circumstances under which these could be challenged, negated, withheld or even jettisoned. The fact that government can no longer extract voluntary obedience from the citizens, as exemplified by the visible presence of soldiers on "internal peace enforcement" in the Niger Delta, points to a moral crisis of authority and a serious problem of legitimacy for the federal government, in the region.

Unfortunately, the state has lost its claim to the monopoly of violence, given the fact that the ethnic groups and individual communities in the region have illegally acquired sophisticated weaponry and trained militia that sometimes overwhelm and make mockery of government forces. There is an increasing fear and concern about the widespread availability and indiscriminate use of weapons and ammunitions by militant communities, cult groups, hoodlums and gangsters. With such weapons, the pre-disposition to use brute force to settle even the smallest disagreements is significantly enhanced. Long years of military rule, and the propensity of politicians to rig elections and intimidate opponents through violence, have also infused a sense of impunity into society such that violence is now considered a continuation of politics by other means (Soremekun, 1995).

It is also important to note that militant youth movements are mostly drawn from a growing cesspool of illiterate and unemployed youths whose attraction to violence is in pecuniary benefits and the social elixir such acts bring, especially as many of their leaders are highly educated, literate but unemployed. With the growing consciousness about the various causes of their disempowerment, youth actions have begun to provoke serious inter-generational crisis, as they are seen by the elders as irresponsible, reckless, vulgar, rebellious and dangerous. Meanwhile the youths perceive the elders as self-centered, greedy reactionary and treacherously pro-establishment (Eyinla and Ukpo, 2006).

Besides, many of the oil communities are moving away from their previous informal, isolated and ad-hoc social mobilization, to more formal, assertive and collective grassroots actions. The crisis of legitimacy is engendering a new generation of social tensions, that have now involved politically established cult groups and gangsters who are unleashing naked violence on rural and urban communities alike. In this way, and because of government's apparent inability or lack of political will to address these issues, the Niger Delta region is fast turning into a gangster's paradise (Ukeje, 2004).

Government had on its own part taken some measures to address the problems of the region. The Babangida administration had set up the oil minerals producing areas development commission (OMPADEC). But the commission failed to achieve its objectives due to allegations of corruption and mismanagement. Then the Niger Delta Development Commission, (NDDC) Act of 1999. The commission has since set to work, and built schools in the creeks without roads leading to them, and sufficient

number of qualified teachers to teach in them. It has built jetties in several communities and provided fishing gears to catch fishes, which have since migrated from the region due to gas flaring or have been completely decimated by oil spills. The NDDC has indeed provided pipe-borne water in several communities in the creeks, most of whose inhabitants have been decimated, or have been sacked by inter-ethnic wars and political violence, while many others have been kept away from the water ways due to piracy, criminality and oil spills.

What all of these translate to, is that the measures taken by the government in the past have failed to adequately address the problems of the Niger Delta. The failure of the government to effectively compel the oil companies to obey the various laws put in place to guide their operations, such as the laws on gas flaring, oil spills and environmental pollution does much to discredit government's efforts and question its sincerity. In addition, the problems of infrastructural development, unemployment, human capital development, hostilities between oil communities and companies, inter-communal and intra-communal conflict, the problem of land tenure, displacement of persons, inadequate compensation, poverty, crime and collapse of traditional social values, are all challenges the government must be prepared to accept in order to restore confidence and re-establish its authority and legitimacy.

Furthermore, government must begin to address the latest warning on the impending danger of oil Exploration and Production activities in the Niger Delta, that if care is not taken, the entire region may eventually be submerged under water on account of unpleasant climatic changes. In this region it was estimated that a total of 850 km of coast line could be vulnerable to sea level rise. If this happens, the lives of over 10 million inhabitants would be in grave danger (Eyinla and Ukpo, 2006).

Finally, government must accept the challenge to reassert its authority in the region. It must deal decisively with the criminal gangs now terrorizing the region to pave way for infrastructural development and constructive engagement with the true representatives of the people. In this regard, many political godfathers who arm and pay cult gangs to terrorize political opponents and rig elections, or intimidate rival ethnic groups must be reined in, by the Federal government. Moreover, the ever rising tide of corruption in high places must be seriously addressed, and effectively checkmated by government at all levels.

THE PROSPECTS

The major prospects for conflict resolution and positive change in the Niger Delta region rest in the number of factors identifiable within the framework of fortuitous circumstances still within the control of the parties to this conflict: First is the fact that the ethnic groups of the Niger Delta are really not yet at war with the state. The warring militants are basically Ijaws, fighting for goals that are not

really congruent with the Niger Delta problem, and criminal cult gangs, both of which are merely exploiting the economic and socio-political crisis for private and primordial ends. What this means is that the Niger Delta struggle is yet to assume a really violent coloration or involve an armed struggle by the people of the region against the state.

Second, is that all ethnic nationalities in the region favour dialogue and negotiation as a means of resolution of this conflict, and will be willing to shift grounds on some issues like total resource control, at least in the short run. This leaves room for negotiation and a very important window of opportunity for conflict resolution. Third is the proposal of government to create at the federal level, a Niger Delta ministry to cater exclusively for the people of the region. This proposal seems to have been received with an open mind by the peoples of the Niger Delta and does present very good prospects for mutual understanding and reconciliation.

Fourth is that there are positive signs that the oil companies in the region, are beginning to embrace the doctrine of Corporate Social Responsibility, and are becoming more positively engaged with some of the communities in their areas of operation. The just concluded sittings of the River State Truth and Reconciliation panel did provide a much needed window of opportunity for frank and open public discussions on the issues involved between the oil companies and their hosts and is expected to yield positive results. Fifth is that, all the governors of the region had convened a South-South Governors forum which met in Yenagoa on Friday the 21st of November 2008, and came out with a resolution to deal collectively with the criminal cult gangs operating in the region (Nigerian Tribune, 2008). This is a giant step in the right direction.

Sixth is that, there is at last some signs of serious effort on the part of government to address the problem of gas flaring in some parts of the region. The 5.9 billion USD Escravos gas to liquid project (EGTL) in Delta state is the first of its kind in the region. The essence of the EGTL is to stop gas flaring (The Nation, 2008). This will go a long way not only to assuage community fears and anxiety, but also provide jobs for unemployed youths of the region.

Seventh is that the country's constitution does not set a ceiling for the derivation formula of revenue allocation. The current 13% being paid to the oil producing states is the constitutionally prescribed minimum. It does not therefore require a constitutional amendment to review the formula upwards to the 50% being demanded by the region. This is feasible and should be considered by government.

Eight is the window of opportunity provided by the proposed 15-year Niger Delta regional development plan. If the Seven-point agenda of the Yar-Adua administration is faithfully implemented within the context of this plan, it will indeed represent a beacon of hope for the resolution of

the Niger Delta crisis in a relatively short time.

Recommendations and Conclusion

In the current circumstances, the most urgent need of the peoples of the Niger Delta is security of lives and property on land, in the creeks, and in the waterways. The government must act decisively and urgently to deal with the various criminal gangs and militia groups, and re-establish its authority through complete military pacification of the region. The militant groups must be made to lay down their arms, and piracy, armed robbery, political assassination and sundry societal ills tackled ruthlessly. The restoration of peace and security alone will pave the way for government to address the genuine grievances of the people of the region. This must be enforced quite firmly, uncompromisingly but objectively.

This must then be followed by a sincere and constructive engagement of the people to dialogue with the government and oil companies. True representatives of the region can be mobilized through grassroots consultation and community involvement. This should steadily lead to granting them an authoritative voice and a sympathetic ear on matters affecting their lives. It would precipitate over time a gradual restoration of a sense of belonging and partnership. This should be complemented with a sustained drive to expand human and social capitals, which are basic ingredients for beating swords into plowshares. For the attainment of these objectives a complete re-orientation and change in the attitude of government and oil companies towards host communities, is a *sine qua non*.

It has been observed elsewhere that the most feasible economic plan would be one that calls for an integrated development in the mould of a Marshall plan for the region (Isiguzo, 2008). The NDDC master plan seems adequate, but the plan for its financing has over the last few years continued to blow in the wind. This must be redressed.

Oil and gas companies operating in the region should be encouraged and if necessary, compelled to comply with international best practices to ensure the protection of natural habitats through uncompromising implementation of the demands of the doctrine of corporate social responsibility. The policy on gas flaring should be firmly implemented.

The provision of basic infrastructure in the Niger Delta is a *sine-qua-non* for sustainable development in the region. A single double carriage way running from Lekki peninsula through Ogheye at the mouth of the Benin River and Koko to join the East-West road to Yenagoa and Port-Harcourt will do much, to open up the region to private investment. This has been done in Epe and Lekki. It can also be done in the Niger Delta.

In order to stem the tide of agitation for absolute and to-

tal resource control the principle of derivation should be reviewed from the current 13 to 50%, and the on-shore-off-shore dichotomy eliminated. The off-shore waters and continental shelf are the legitimate farmlands of the littoral communities and this fact should be acknowledged and respected.

Finally, adequate compensation should be paid wherever there are oil spills and the pollution cleared within stipulated time. If these measures are taken to address the issues already highlighted in this paper it may be possible in the long run to achieve peace, co-operation and mutual co-existence. With corporate social responsibility genuinely embraced by all parties concerned, swords can and will be beaten into plowshares, and lasting peace and sustainable development will return to the hitherto troubled Niger Delta region.

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