

Ethnic Militias and Criminality in the Niger-Delta

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Abstract

The proliferation of Ethnic militias and their activities in Nigeria particularly in the Niger Delta region has moved from closing of flow station into kidnapping for ransom. The aims of these militias have changed from asking for fairness and equity in the distribution of the wealth of the Nigerian state into a serious form of criminality involving the kidnapping of expatriates for ransom and lately politicians and relatives. The activities of these groups have serious economic and security implications for the region and the nation at large. It is against this background that this paper examines the actives of ethic militias and the consequences of the activities of the groups in the Niger Delta Region. The paper proffers solution to the criminality of this group in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria.

Keywords: Ethnic, Militias, Criminality, Niger Delta.

1. Introduction

In Nigeria, ethnic and religious formations have taken the centre stage and played prominent role with socio-political interactions of the Nigerian state. Ethnic socio-political formations like the Ohaneze, Arewa and the Afenifera are the most tangible on the political arena. These groups have penetrating influence. The consequences of these groups, particularly at the youth level are ethnic militias. Though the agenda and activities of these groups ie the militias and the ethnic socio-political groups may not necessary be related. The most prominent of the ethnic militias include, Oodua Peoples Congress (OPC), Egbesu Boys of Africa (EBA), Movement for the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), Niger Delta People Volunteer Force (NDPVF), Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), Arewa Peoples Congress (APC) and religious militia groups in Northern Nigeria. As already stated, these movements seeking to protect and advance different ethnic interests are now, contesting not just the political space and democratic dividends, but also resource control as part of the liberation of the political environment. (Agbu, O. 2002). These groups, who claim to represent ethnic and regional interests, adopt diverse strategies which include violence and criminally motivated actions in the conduct of their activities.

There are however, different opinions on how to tackle the problems emanating from

the actions of these groups. Some argue that the activities of these militia group are away of demanding for fairness and equity in distribution of the wealth of the national bulk of which they believe comes from the region, these group see the activities of ethnic militias as a manifestation and frustrations expressed as a result of dysfunction in the structure and character of the Nigerian state. The solution for this group lies in addressing national question, particularly as it affects the Niger Delta region. Others see the activities of the militia groups as an act of criminality. The solution for this group is that since this is purely a security questioning the state must deploy its coercive machinery to put these activities under some meaningful control.

It is against this background that the paper examines the phenomenon of ethnic militias in the Nigerian context with particular reference to the Niger Delta groups in the Niger Delta region. The paper also examines criminality as these groups in the Niger Delta and also proffer solutions on how to address the activities of militia groups which presently constitutes a threat to the survival of the Nigerian state.

2. Conceptualizing Ethnic Militia in Nigeria

Duverger, M. (1976) sees militia as a

“a kind of private army whose members are enrolled on military lives, one subjected to the same discipline and save traning as a soilders, like them weaving uniforms and badges, heady by a band and flags and like them ready to meet, the enemy with weapons in physical combat”

They are never mobilized on a permanent basis and also not maintained full time by their organization. Moreover he noted that two categories are distinguished among militias, namely those who may be referred to as a kind of “active army”, who are ever ready for confrontation and others who are described move or less like “reserve”, Furthermore he observed that the military character of the militia appears not only in its composition but also in its structure, which is usually “based on very small groups which build up into Pyramids to form larger and larger units: (Duverger, 1976).

Ethnic militia can be described as a youth organization formed for the struggle against deprivation and marginalization which have transformed into violent militant youths and have also changed their objectives from struggles for ethnic desires into criminal activities.

3. Ethnic Militias in the Niger Delta

The emergence and growth of militia groups in contemporary Nigeria can be traced to the internal contradiction of the Nigerian Political Economy. First is the nature of the Nigerian state which has been a violent one and has strived to maintain control and dominance of the society through violent approaches.

Militia groups became visible in the Nigerian state in the 1990s when the Nigerian state was in distress of a callous military dictatorship, particularly during the Babagida and Abacha regimes. One of the consequences of the character these regimes was the rise of militia groups. (Adejumobi, 2002).

The other dimension to the rise of militia groups under the Babangida and Abacha regimes was the marginalization and social deprivation particularly for the ethnic minorities of the Niger Delta region. The response of the government to the Niger Delta crisis has been the

militarization of the region to keep abeyant youths and other groups to ensure the free flow of oil to the Nigerian state. This led to the emergence of several militant youths while the existing non-violent groups resorted to violence as a challenge to brutality occasioned by the presence of military personnel's in the region. The objective of these militant groups was to challenge the violent posture of the state and emphasize their point of marginalization and deprivation characterizing the region.

The above context led to the emergence and growth of militia groups in the Niger Delta region. Between 1990 and 1999, not less than twenty-four ethnic based minority right groups emerged in the region with radical posture. These include the Egbesu Boys of Africa (EBA), Chikoko Ijaw National Congress, Ijaw Youth Council (IYC), Ijaw Peace Movement (IPM), Isoko National Youth Movement (INYM) and the Ogoni People (MOSOP). Others that emerged after 1999 include movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) and Niger Delta Peoples Volunteer Force (NDPVF).

None of these groups at their inception had violent inclinations as their objectives. The prevailing circumstances forced their formation into violence which has degenerated into criminal activities.

The following factors which include nature and character of the Nigerian state, failure and lack of political leadership and political institutions, the struggle of power and economic relations among ethnic nationalities are some of the factors that acted as a springboard to the emergence of ethnic militia groups in the Nigerian state and the Niger Delta region in particular. The resolve was to resist the deprivation, social injustice, marginalization neglect, and seeming insecurity for the people through whatever means including the formation of underground organizations and possibly instability in the Niger region.

4. Kidnapping and Hostage Taking in Niger Delta

Table 1: Police Records on Some Cases of Kidnapping/Hostage-taking/Sea Piracy in Niger Delta

S/N	Nature of cases	Date Reported	Location of Cases	Militants involved	Hostages/Victims & their origin	Date Release	Reason for action
1	Kidnapping	03/03/04	Biseni, Bayelsa (BYS)	32 Militants	13 Hostages	08/03/04	Oil company security operatives/Youths clash
2	Hostage taking	19/12/05	Peretotu BYS	24 Militants	42 Hostages	03/10/06	Impeachment of BYS Speaker/Government
3	Hostage Taking	15/01/06	Swali BYS	48 Militants	14 Expatriates & 1 Nigeria	23/02/06	Arrest of one militant in Port Harcourt
4	Sea Piracy	19/02/07	Sagbama BYS	9 Sea Pirates	6 Policemen	19/02/07	No source of livelihood
5	Militant attack	10/05/07	Otueke BYS	Faceless Militants	16 Victims	23/05/07	Detention of Alamiyeseigha
6	Kidnapping	25/05/07	Akassa BYS	40 Militants	9 Expatriates	08/06/07	Oil Production

					of TEXACO		without development of the area
7	Kidnapping	31/07/07	Amarata BYS	14 Militants	11 Year- Old boy of a member of BYHA	04/08/0 7	Welfare of militants
8	Kidnapping	08/08/07	Gbarain, BYS	11 Militants	Mother of the Speaker of BYHA	22/08/0 7	Welfare of militants
9	Kidnapping	18/08/07	Akassa, BYS	23 Militants	Mother of a member of BYHA	07/09/0 7	Welfare of militants
10	Kidnapping	08/10/07	Odi, BYS	Commande r Pius Group	1 Nigeria	15/10/0 7	Ransom
11	Kidnapping	15/10/07	Southern- Ijaw BYS	Unknown	1 Nigeria	15/10/0 7	Ransom

Source: Culled from Police Crime Diary, Bayelsa State Command

Table 2: Selected Cases of Abductions/Kidnapping for Ransom (2002-2003)

S/N	Action/Date	MNC/Oil Serving Co.	Youth Group/Ethnic Group/State	Ascertained Purpose	Outcome
1	Hostage taking of 10 workers/April 2002	Shell	Militant Youth Gang. Ekeremor LGA, Ijaw/Bayelsa State	Ransom Demand for NGN 3.1M	Resulted from failure to yield to alleged frivolous demands
2	Kidnap of Staff/June 29-July 2003	Oil Servicing Co. Working for shell	Ijaw Youth Militants in Bomadi/Burutu LGAs/Delta State.	Demand for NGN25.4m	State government intervention/Ne gotiated release after 14 days
3	Kidnap of 9 Crew & 4 Military escorts of oil barges/November 11-13 2003.		Ijaw Militants	Ransom/other demands	Released 2 days later after threats by state government/sec urity agencies
4	Kidnap of 19 oil workers	Chevron Texaco	Militant Ijaw Youths Bayelsa State	Ransom demands	Intervention of state Government
5	Kidnap of 7 workers/November 28-December 2003	Bredero Shaw Oil Servicing Co. (Shell)	Militant Ijaw Youths/Delta State.	Ransom demands for USD 5m.	State Government Intervention/Ne gotiation.
6	Murder of 7 workers & Military Personnel/April 2004	Chevron Texaco	Militant Youths along Benin River Area/Delta State	..	

Source: William 2000: Agency France-Press 2003.

Tables 1 and 2 shows cases of kidnapping and hostage taking in the Niger Delta between 2002-2007 for ransom. This has been prevalent in the core oil producing states of Delta, Rivers and Bayelsa. The incidence of kidnapping and hostage taking began in the 1990 and took a new dimension recently when kidnapping and hostage did not only involved workers with MNCS but politicians. A large number of indigenous expatriate workers, particularly foreign nationals and security personnel's attached to them and MNCS have been kidnapped and taken hostage for the purpose of ransom. It is evident that there are syndicates and warlords to which some militia groups are loyal to (Omonobi and Okhomina, 2003).

The extensive regime of violence in the struggle for appropriation has not only been directed at the MNCs but has also involved the imposition of illegal levies on road users, land property developers and contractors handling projects (Onojowo 2001). The earnings in the form ransom from this criminal activity are utilized to sustain the militia groups.

5. Ethnic Militia Activities and Criminality in the Niger Delta

The activities of ethnic militia groups in the Niger Delta have transformed from activities to counter the struggle against deprivation and marginalization to criminal acts.

In examining the dimension and magnitude of criminal caused by the activities of the ethnic group, the paper explores the frustration - aggression hypothesis. The hypothesis posits that people are pushed into aggressive behaviour by drive influenced by frustration. Dolland et al (1939).

The above explanation can further be explained from two points in relation to activities of militia groups in the Niger Delta.

Firstly, frustration leads to some form of aggression. This may not take place in all situations since the level of tolerance differs from one group to another. The magnitude of the perceived stumbling block is a function of frustration projection. Given the relative strength of the Nigerian state in the case of Niger Delta - government face- off often results into frustration displacement. As a consequence therefore, the activities of militia groups are directed at government and other groups in the region who would ordinarily not be affected (Hewstone and Stroebe, 2001).

The several point is that aggression is a consequence of frustration. The socio economic hardship and inequity in the distribution of the nation's oil wealth occasioned by marginalization and deprivation is expressed in violence activities by militia groups in the region. This accounts for crime related activities which include hostage taking demanding for ransom, vandalization of oil pipeline and illegal bunkering and attacks on military personnel's.

In other to substantiate the criminal base of activities engaged in by militia groups there is the need to raise three vital issues. The first is why do militia activities occur and sustained? How is the image of this militia activities constructed and maintained? Third, can these activities by militia be classified as crime? Crime is a function of driving philosophies underpinning state criminal definition and criminal justice process. From the moralist perspective, militia activities occasioning crime hinged on injustice is non- violation of the penal code, but from the perspective of law enforcement it constitutes a legal breach that need to be checked and sanctioned. Making this a crime diverts the attention of the exploited from the root cause of inequity which is firmly institutionalized in the Niger Delta (Summer, 1990).The problem of environmental pollution or degradation, socio-economic closure, deprivation and such others are unlikely to attract the same degree of moral condemnation that attends militia related problem (Munae and McLaughlin, 2001).

The major emphasis of the people of Niger Delta give us our place, accord us the A honour that befits us, let our voice count in the projects that affect our lives and bequeath us what is just, right and proper. It is in light of the above that the activities of militia groups has escalated.

At the onset of the formation of militia groups, their objective was to fight against deprivation, inequity and marginalization in Niger Delta. However, this has degenerated into criminal activities such as bunkering, vandalization of petroleum pipeline, kidnapping and hostage taking.

6. Solutions to the Menace of Ethnic Militia in the Niger Delta

This paper has analyzed the dynamics of ethnic militia groups and criminality. In investigating the most efficient way of dowsing the tension generated by activities of militia groups in the Niger Delta region, the paper suggest the adoption of the Vulnerability Reduction Strategy (VRS) approach. This approach is inherent in the combination of accommodative, compromise and collaborative strategies.

- * Accommodative strategy: This approach involves the discontinuation of the current competitive approach which often generates exaggeration of value of granting concession on resource revenue allocation to the affected region, the use of talent and manifest threat built on fear of reprisals and the use of force, management of truth on the actual number of barrels of crude pumped from the Niger Delta. The accommodative approach that necessitate committed actions from a II parties. This will include invitation of stakeholder's conference, acceptance of the unadulterated of the claims of deprivation, presentation of sincere and realistic demands and concessions and stoppage of self inflicting risks.
- Compromise Strategy: This approach involves the manifestation of informal third party intervention void of interest that will assist in the transformation of conflict elements. The joint acceptable informal group will help dowse the existing tension, facilitate formal round table conference between the aggrieved groups and the implacable state. The informal group will attempt solution to existing deprivation, perceived injustice and marginalization. The informal group will neutralize elements of future conflicts.
- Collaborative Strategy: At this stage effort will be made to constitute formal mechanism that will be responsible for formal grievance handling. This will involve the establishment of joint committees who will be responsible for the implementation of jointly agreed resolutions (Jegade & Foluke, 2007).

There are major steps necessary for dowsing the crisis in the Niger Delta which includes:

- Provision of a conclusive environment that will enhance meaningful negotiations.
- Encourage the mutual embracement of the collective dependency of Nigerian state and the oil communities.
- Total commitment on the part of the state towards the provision of resources and the expansion of existing resources should be made available to the people.
- Resources allocation must be integrative, equitable and the encouragement of unimpeded flow from the top to the bottom.
- The circumventing of resources meant for the region by the elite group must be checked and arrested.
- Efforts must be intensified by governments at all levels, in coloration with the organized private sector and civil society groups to expand the opportunities and improve the quality of education and skill acquisition for the youth.
- There is also the need for imaginative and far-reaching initiatives in the areas of job

creation, poverty alleviation and the refocusing of youthful energy toward constructive endeavours.

Above all, there is the need for government to put in place security mechanism to curbs the menace of militia groups in the region.

7. Conclusion

The approach adopted by the Nigerian state in addressing the problem of ethnic militia groups by criminalizing them and branding them as disgruntled and misguided elements or terrorist groups rather than looking at the issues that forms the basis of their emergence and activities. The paper opined that fundamental issues bordering on social deprivation, inequity in the distribution of the Nigerian state's wealth, and marginalization related to the regions minority status in the Nigerian federation, and the situation where the dominant ethnic groups use the oil resources gained from the Niger Delta to develop their own areas needs to address. The hardship characterizing have been well documented. The response of the Nigerian state to the crisis in the Niger Delta has been to militarize the region with the intension of keeping at bang restive youths and militia groups. Against the backdrop of a non responsive approach to the fundamental problems of activities of militia groups in Niger Delta, these groups have shifted from the objectives and orientation of their emergence which include agitating for equity and justice in the distribution of the nation's wealth and power, deprivation and marginalization to criminal activities bordering n lives and properties. (Illegal theft and sales of refined petroleum product and crude oil, kidnapping and hostage taking for ransom).

Conclusively, before the issue of criminality occasioned by the Niger Delta can be addressed, there is the need to address the fundamental issues bordering on deprivation, marginalization, inequity and security must be addressed.

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