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Insurgents and Their Acts: Understanding the Armed Groups in the Niger Delta, Nigeria

Nwackukwu J. Obiakor PhD
Department of History and International Studies, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Anambra State, Nigeria

Otoo, Rufus D.
Department of History and International Studies, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Anambra State, Nigeria
Hansome1159@gmail.com

Abstract

Insurgency in the Niger Delta is a recurring decimal, cutting across the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial history of the region. Though, causes of armed uprising in the Niger Delta vary significantly, however, the discovery of crude oil had changed the nomenclature of conflicts in the region. As the ill feeling of neglect, marginalization, environmental degradation, water pollution, youth unemployment and monumental poverty even in the midst of plenty became the springboard that encouraged the armed uprising and brought about the emergence of sophisticated armed groups in the region. Hence this study will examine the Niger Delta insurgents and their acts, while evaluating the recruitment strategy of the insurgents, the source of arms, funding and the military training of the Niger Delta insurgent as well as other logistical prowess. Using both primary and secondary data, this study argues that contemporary armed groups in the Niger Delta region are increasingly more sophisticated in terms of training, information gathering and weaponry including enhance ICT tech. Thus, any effort to curb incessant arm uprising in the Niger Delta region must provide employment opportunities, education platforms and above all an enabling environment for peace to strive in the Niger Delta.

Keywords: *Insurgents, Niger Delta, Arm Uprising, Arms & Funds*

Introduction

Armed groups have long posed existential threats to the state. Whether we call them non-state actors, Armed Political Action Groups (APAGs) or simply armed groups, these entities operate outside the sovereign state's monopoly on coercive force to achieve political goals in opposition to the state. Until recently, armed groups lacked any true international capacity. The armed groups most relevant to the state were ones operating within its borders - be they those using psychological pressure to achieve a political goal (terrorists), furthering a criminal enterprise (organized crime), attempting to change the regime (insurgents) or simply resisting the will of the state through tribal or ethnic affiliation (militias).[1]

The goals of these groups whether terrorist, insurgent, militia, vigilantes or gang/cultist etc. varies; however, they were usually domestically situated. Armed groups are de facto international actors.[2]Common ethnic lines of militias in different states have emerged and rare is the case that an insurgency does not have international support from either a state or a group outside the state. Some of the greatest atrocities have been caused by groups defending or advancing their political aspirations and sacred values. In Nigeria, ethnic and religious groups have taken the centre stage and play prominent roles in the dynamics of governance of the Nigeria State.[3] Ethnic socio-political formations like the Ohaneze Ndigbo, Arewa Consultative Forum with Arewa People's Congress as

its armed wing and the Afenifere have all made their marks in the political history of Nigeria. Also, there are ethnic militias which include Oodua People Congress (OPC), Egbesu Boys of Africa (EBA), Movement for the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), Niger Delta People Volunteer Force (NDPVF), and Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND).[4]

However, the armed groups in the Niger Delta are drawn from existing community defense groups, vigilantes, ethnic militias and street/creek cult gangs, oftentimes the lines between political struggle and banditry are often hazy.[5]Armed uprising has been part of man's strategy to effect fundamental changes in the political, economic and social strata of society when marginalization is perceived. The Niger Delta as the third largest Delta in the world covering an area of about 112,000 square kilometers crisscrossed by a large number of rivers, rivulets, creeks, canals and streams is home to numerous armed groups.[6] The manipulation of ethnicity by the governing elites facilitated the emergence of armed groups in the Niger Delta region thereby giving rise to insurgency. In addendum, armed uprising in the Niger Delta region rose from unequal access to social, political and economic opportunities. The chapter examines insurgency in the Niger Delta region with emphasis on armed group's structure. It evaluates the recruitment strategy, military training and the source of funding for armed groups operating in the Niger Delta region.

Background to Insurgency in the Niger Delta

Historical antecedents showed that, insurgency in the Niger Delta region cuts across the three periodization of Nigeria's history, starting from pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial, with three distinct era in Nigeria's economic history of slave trade, palm oil trade and contemporary crude oil trade.[7]For instance, the pre-colonial era of palm oil trade the region recorded stiff resistance and opposition from the Niger Delta people through local potentates like King Jaja of Opobo(1887), King Nana Olumo of Itsekiri and King Koko of Nembe against the European merchants/missionaries who sought to gain entry into the interior for imperial gains. Moreso, agitations for development attention, which set the stage for armed conflict is traced to the colonial era, when the fear of domination and neglect by the major ethnic groups in the then eastern region led to demands for state creation. If done, this would checkmate or guards against ethnicity-based domination and development neglect.

The colonial government at a Constitutional Conference, held in London, 1957/1958 established the Henry Willink Commission to inquire into the fears and demands, and having recognized the lack of development as the key reason for continued agitations in the Niger Delta. Hence, the Henry Willink Commission of Inquiry recommended the region as a Special Area for development, and suggested the establishment of a board to plan its development before Independence.[8]After independence, the Nigeria government established the Niger Delta Development Board (NDDB) in 1961 to address the development needs and challenges of the region. However, the impact of the NDDB on development is insignificant, thus failing to alleviate the development plight of the people. The aggrieved Ijaws and others in the Niger Delta felt that the Henry Willink Commission of Enquiry in 1958 had denied them the appropriate and sufficient voice in the management of their affairs. As it failed to recommend the creation of a separate State (Rivers State), embracing all the Ijaw communities in the Niger Delta.[9]

There was a rising wave of insurgency in the Niger Delta region with the emergence of Major Isaac Adaka Boro in 1966, the de facto leader of an armed group known as the Niger Delta Volunteer Service (NDVS).[10] However, with the support of its followers, Adaka Boro's struggle saw the declaration of an independent Niger Delta Republic against General Aguiyi Ironsi's administration but this secessionist attempt known in the literature as the 'Twelve Days Revolutionary' was shortlived.[11]In the post Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970) era, the voice of Isaac Adaka Boro was replaced by that of the Niger Delta playwright and environmental activist Ken Saro Wiwa who popularized the Ogoni ''Bill of Rights'' and gave the Niger Delta struggles international recognition

before his gruesome murder in 1995.[12]The politics of ethnicity, marginalization, repression, and religion that greeted Nigeria's return to democratic rule in 1999 facilitated the emergence of ethnically informed insurgent groups. These ethnically informed insurgents have taken the centre stage and have played prominent roles in the dynamics of governance in the Niger Delta region.

Factors Responsible for the Emergence of Armed Groups in the Niger Delta

In the case of the Niger Delta, the ill feeling of neglect, marginalization, environmental degradation, water pollution, youth unemployment and monumental poverty even in the midst of plenty became the springboard that encouraged the armed uprising among youths of the region. The youths saw armed uprising as the fastest way of getting the government and the multinationals oil corporations to come to the aid of the people of the Niger Delta whose arable land and water resource had been rendered useless as a result continuous oil exploration.[13] The Niger Delta is home to numerous armed groups. The activities of armed groups that operate in Niger Delta like their counterparts in other parts of the world were marked by asymmetric tactics and techniques.

These tactics are difficult to defeat for conventional militaries that lack the flexibility to shift mindsets on a constant basis, giving rise to a method of war that attempts to leverage on the weakness of government and conventional military structure.[14] These armed groups like others (Insurgents) elsewhere were formed to address environmental rights violations and change the trend of economic backwardness that had plagued the Niger Delta after decades of oil exploration. Since the discovery of crude oil, the inhabitants of the Niger Delta region have been subjected to untold hardship through oil pollution, environmental degradation, and the destruction of both the environment and the local population source of livelihood. Also attributed to be part of issues responsible for the emergence of armed groups in the Niger Delta is the politics surrounding resource control dictated by the federal government. Until recently, the upheaval in relation to revenue allocation has grown from bad to worse by assuming horrendous dimensions in the early 1990s.However, after the Kaiama declaration of 11th December 1998 and the attendant Odi massacre that followed, armed groups in the Niger Delta started to challenge not only the Nigerian state but also the Multinational Oil Companies (MNOCs) perpetrating violence using aggressive means.[15]In the aftermath of Nigeria's return to democratic rule in 1999, the trend of armed violence skyrocketed in the Niger Delta region.

Prominent among the numerous insurgents groups that operated in the Niger Delta region are the Egbesu Boys of Africa (EBA), Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), Joint Revolution Council (JRC), Niger Delta Avengers (NDA), Movement for the Survival of the Ijaw Ethnic in the Niger Delta (MOSIEND), Niger Delta Volunteer Force (NDVF), Niger Delta Vigilantes (NDV), Federated Niger Delta Communities (FNDIC), BiniOru of Furopa, Niger Delta Strike Force (NDSF), Niger Delta Freedom Fighters (NDFF), Coalition for Militant Action (COMA), Movement of the Niger Delta People (MONDP), Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force (NDPVF), the Niger Delta Liberation Front (NDLF).[16] Others are; the Egbesu Water Lions (EWL), Asawana Deadly Force of the Niger Delta (ADFND), the Adaka Boro Marine Commandos, Joint Niger Delta Liberation Force (JNDLF), Red Scorpion, Ultimate Warriors of the Niger Delta, Niger Delta Red Squad (NDRS), New Delta Suicide Squad (NDSS), Concerned Militant Leaders (CML), Niger Delta People's Democratic Front (NDPDF), National Coalition of the Niger Delta Ex-Agitators (NCNDE-A),[17] the Niger Delta Greenland Justice Mandate, the Ijaw/Oduduwa Militant Movement (in Ogun and Lagos States) etc.

The Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) and the Joint Revolutionary Council (JRC) are pan-delta militant coalitions that press for a new political reality in the Niger Delta by combining militant action with a political rationale.[18]The Joint Revolutionary Council (JRC), at times described as the most overarching resistance group, focuses on political statements**.** While the JRC castigates laws and structures that limit Niger Delta autonomy and

criticize the corrupt political class, its expressed aims do not include government overthrow or regional secession. Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), which overlaps with the JRC, began to crystallize in 2005 and resembles a "brand," with networks led by several charismatic field commanders franchised across the delta.[19] Tactics of these allied warlords include planned, coordinated attacks on multiple sites using high-tech equipment, abduction of hostages, arms trafficking, and other crimes.

Most insurgents' groups operating in the Niger Delta protest against the Nigeria state and the Multinational Oil Companies (MNOCs) over long years of oil exploration and exploitation which in most case had culminated in water pollution, environmental degradation and youth unemployment. Consequently, the emergence of a myriad of armed groups in the Niger Delta region was a violent response to this ill feeling of neglect, exploited and poverty in the midst of plenty. Various scholars have attempted to describe the insurgent groups operating in the Niger Delta region. Some see the insurgent groups in the Niger Delta as economic warriors fighting for their private pockets.[20] Others affirms, the insurgent groups as an amorphous ad-hoc group of violent youths who have no known leadership and operational base, seeking political relevance in the region and also involved illegal oil bunkering through vandalism.[21]

Recruitment Strategy of Insurgents Groups in the Niger Delta

The recruitment strategy of the armed groups in the Niger Delta varies from group to group with the bulk of recruits coming almost entirely from the Ijaw ethnic group in the Niger Delta region. For instance, membership into the Bini Oru armed group was restricted to Foropa community, as this armed group started first as a vigilante group saddled with the responsibility of securing the community which has been plagued by series of insecurity threats ranging from theft, piracy and other social vices.[22] The armed group Bini Oru of Foropa further changed in its nomenclature of maintaining peace within the community to projecting as an insurgent group to the multinational oil companies. Chevron Texaco operating in the community were said to have ignored the Memoranda of Understanding (MoU) entered into with the community, and abandoned their corporate social responsibility.[23] Moreso, the aforementioned situation of failed MoU was prevalent in most Niger Delta communities who played host to Multinational Oil Communities.

It is pertinent to note that recruits of these insurgent groups (insurgents) were also enticed by the desire to eke out a living from the bourgeoning enterprises of Kidnapping, destruction of oil installation and bunkering as they have regularly posited that the resource underneath their feet belongs to the Niger Deltans and should be controlled by the people in the region. For instance, most Ijaw youths joined Boy loaf under the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) not as freedom fighters but criminals who seized the opportunity afforded by the insurgents (Niger Delta Militants) to perpetrate criminal act.[24] The operations of these gangs were centred on kidnapping; bunkering, sea pirates among others and these activities are tailored towards making personal gains, and not fighting for the general interest of the Niger Deltans. Thus, Boyloaf got the support of other criminal elements ranging from cult groups, pirates and other restive youths that operated independently but on a low key. This armed group got its arms and ammunition from a renowned arms dealer from Amassoma in Southern Ijaw local government area, Henry Okah, who was based in South Africa.

In addendum, the terrain also influenced the recruitment strategy of the insurgent groups in the Niger Delta. The Niger Delta is crisscross by rivers, rivulets, creeks with an embodiment of a large mangrove swamp which served as a safe haven for the insurgents. According to Alagoa, the Niger Delta has the largest mangrove swamp in the world;[25] hence familiarity and adaptability to this complex aquatic terrain became the watch word for recruitment into various armed groups operating in different communities in the Niger Delta. Suffice it to say that the armed groups of the Niger Delta

are nebulous and hard to categorize. Most of the recruits are males aged twenty to thirty-nine, single but with dependents, 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.[26]

Source of Arms and Funding for Insurgent Groups in the Niger Delta

Armed uprising became unprecedented in Niger Delta with the advent of the present democratic dispensation in 1999, and in the 2003 second tenure bid of top politicians seeking political offices, who eagerly funded armed groups for political gains.[27] It was from these periods that militant youths started brandishing machine guns, AK47 rifles and other weapons of war openly bought by politicians and political godfathers that wants to win elections at all cost. This gave the youths impetus to engage in street battles, kill perceived opponents (political or non-political), committing many more heinous crimes. Like in the case of Odi in Bayelsa state, traditionally constituted authority was overthrown and this culminated in the subsequent challenge on security agencies even without molestation or arrest by the law enforcement agents. During the 2003 elections, in particular most governor of the Niger Deltare-contested, and their political stalwarts mobilized thousands of delinquent youths to create a formidable body of camp fellow who intimidated candidates, the electorate at campaign rallies and even in ordinary circumstance.[28]

Increasingly, insurgent group in the Niger Delta had benefitted tremendously from oil bunkering. Oil bunkering has provided an important source of funding which aided the purchase of arms and ammunition for especially for insurgents operating in the Niger Delta. Bunkering is the illegal tapping of oil pipelines and wellheads to siphon off crude oil. The siphoned oil is then sold to foreign buyers or bartered for small arms. Oil bunkering is believed to be a lucrative endeavour, providing an estimated USD 1–4billion per year.[29] Furthermore, bunkered oil provides significant funding necessary for armed groups to purchase more powerful weapons from external sources, and in some cases the oil is ex-changed directly for weapons, usually new AK-47 assault rifles.[30] In terms of its impact, illegal bunkering has contributed significantly to the lawlessness, insecurity and physical violence that have prevailed in the Niger Delta in the past decades. According to Obasi, armed groups engaged heavily in bunkering and have used monies earned to acquire vast arsenal of weapons.[31] Indeed, illegal bunkering has been a key factor in sustaining insurgent groups operating in the region.

International oil companies operating in the Delta region have also contributed to the problem of small arms proliferation. A decision by the government to allow oil companies to import weapons in order to arm police assigned to oil installations reportedly brought in a number of arms.[32] Oil companies operating in the Delta do utilize Nigerian police to protect their installations; however, they argue that these police are employed by the government and allocated to the companies for this specific work, even though the companies pay the normal salaries and benefits of these officers.[33] Shell, the largest oil producer in the Delta, argues that these police are not armed.[34] The large revenues attached to oil production ensure a close relationship between government and the oil companies. This has led many communities to view them as one and the same, and such perceptions have been reinforced by reports of oil companies directly calling upon the police, military, and navy to quell problems at their installations rather than seeking assistance through the government.[35] Oil companies have also provided payments to groups and communities in return for being allowed to operate in peaceful conditions. While payments to militant groups might provide a modicum of security and stability, they also threaten to empower militants and provide them with the financial means to improve their arsenals.[36]

Other sources of small arms include arms dealers, serving and retired military and police officers, returning peacekeepers, armed groups across borders and other influential individuals including political elites.[37]These weapons transit into the country and into the hands of armed groups, national dealers, political and community leaders, and individuals. Demand is the key to understanding the trade: as long as insecurity persists, and economic and political opportunities for gain exist through the use of force, demands for small arms will continue.[38]Nigeria has a lengthy and porous borders, a number of airports and numerous seaports along the southern coast, smuggling and cross-border trade are difficult to detect and monitor.[39] Limited staff, vehicles and resources make the job of customs officials , the police and the navy all the more difficult. While many are certain that small arms and light weapons are coming into the country, as evidence by the presence of foreign-made weapons in circulation, the exact entrance route of these weapons is less clear. A number of transit countries are often mentioned. These include the neighbouring countries of Benin, Cameroon, Chad and Niger, as well as Gabon and Guinea Bissau.[40] Other reported source of arms include Cote d Ivoire, Liberia, South Africa, Turkey and Ukraine, as well as Bulgaria, Kosovo and Serbia.[41]

Reportedly, the three most notorious arms smuggling frontiers in Nigeria are in the south-west (Idi Iroko in Ogun state and Seme in Lagos state), in the south (port city of Warri in Delta state).[42] Warri has been referred to as the 'hub of the gun trade in the Niger Delta', and its location in the Niger Delta, as well as the increasing demand for small arms in the region, make this a logical place for the reception of shipments.[43]In respect to arms supply, some members of the armed groups infer that another major source of arms and ammunition for the insurgent in the Niger Delta region is Iraq and Somalia. On this premise, bunkered crude oil is traded on the black market in exchanged for weapons on the high sea.[44]Aside the arms and ammunition bought, weapons were also seized from captured government soldiers, police and other security agents. Like their counterparts in other parts of the world, the armed groups in the Niger Delta financed themselves by exploiting the very oil industry that has blighted the region for decades.[45] Weapons were also obtained through thefts from dealers' armouries, and residences; seizures from security officials during robbery/ kidnapping or hijacking or clash with another armed group.[46]

Military Training of Armed Groups in the Niger Delta

Military training is a crucial determinant of insurgent's behavior during insurgency. It influences not only internal governance practices among armed groups, but also how insurgent organizations relate to civilian populations, including how, where, and against whom they employ violence against during an insurgent attack. While some armed groups use military training to direct violence against specific civilian groups, in many context military training for armed groups is used to restrain the accidental or deliberate targeting of insurgents by government forces in ways that might undermine broader strategic goals of the insurgents.[47]Globally, armed groups with widely differing motives and structures generally place great emphasis upon military training and indoctrination which forms the basis for insurgent operations.[48]Hence, military training are fundamental mechanisms through which armed groups attempt to shape the behavior of individual combatants.[49]

In the case of armed groups in the Niger Delta region, these non-state armed forces spend significant time drilling, practicing, and absorbing information. This process has two basic functions: the socialization of recruits into the norms and operating procedures of the organization, and the inculcation of specific skills that allow recruits to fight effectively.[50]The goal of training is to turn ordinary individuals into non-state soldiers. As Morris Janowitz affirms that, "professional socialization, that is, education and training is considered essential to fashion and refashion the military man",[51] a perspective that the insurgents exploit strategically to aid their preparability.

Through the support of retired military personnel who served as trainers of Niger Delta insurgents, members of these armed groups were trained in the production and application of coercive force.

For the military, the production and application of force requires a range of mechanical, technical, and organizational skills. The content of this sort of training "military training" is correspondingly broad and diverse: soldiers are taught to effectively use weapons, maintain their physical condition, work with equipment, execute a wide range of tactics and maneuvers, operate on varying forms of terrain, and to function smoothly within larger units.[52]This also forms the fundamentals of the insurgent groups in the Niger Delta region. Military training of insurgent groups in the Niger Delta region is typically routinized and intense. Furthermore, recruits are put through periods of extreme physical and mental stress, typically via taxing physical tasks, sleep deprivation, and psychological pressure from trainers.[53]

After completing physical training sessions, new recruits of armed groups in the Niger Delta region moved on to military-style training for combatants. One former militant trainer described the specialized training that he provided to members of the Niger Delta insurgent groups as intelligence gathering, surveillance, including bombsplanting.[54] A 17-year-old member of an armed group who had received this training confirmed the practice. According to a member of an armed group, the first stage of training for new recruits involves training using imitation wooden guns and bladed weapons. Thereafter selected combatants are absorbed into the regular force and are handed real weapons, while the others serve as reserve with routinely intense training.[55]

It is worth noting that series of alliances were formed between armed groups in the Niger Delta. These alliances took different forms ranging from information dissemination, shifting camps, combined operations etc. Under information dissemination armed groups in the Niger Delta region share information regarding foreseeable security challenges to their operations. This strategy accounts for the success of Niger Delta armed groups to out play the security operatives posted to the region through the exploitation of ungoverned space.[56] As Otoo makes clear that, 'these armed groups in the Niger Delta cooperated to carry out an operation and this impedes on the surveillance operations of the security operatives posted to the region'.[57] These armed groups also shift camps from time to time just to ensure that their true identity remain anonymous and also to safeguard hostages kidnapped and whose ransom is yet to be collected.[58] This shifting camps strategy made the operations of these armed groups more fluid. As a group would desert its camp and move over to another group's camp, and in some other instances, these groups operate more than one camp such as camp 1, 2, 3, etc.

Conclusion

Armed groups in the Niger Delta region like their counterparts elsewhere have long posed an existential threat to the Nigerian state. In the case of the Niger Delta, the ill feeling of neglect, marginalization, environmental degradation, water pollution, youth unemployment and monumental poverty even in the midst of plenty became the springboard that encouraged the armed uprising among youths of the region. These armed groups have become increasingly formidable, with the bulk of recruits coming almost entirely from the Ijaw ethnic group of the Niger Delta, the insurgents leverage of the terrain of the region while carrying out their acts. Also worthy of note, is the fact that retired military personnel who sympathize with the course of the insurgents were readily available to train recruits in combat and weapon handling. Thus, the increased proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALWs) in the region especially and Nigeria at large, have made the insurgents even more sophisticate in terms of weaponry. However, any effort to curb incessant arms uprising in the Niger Delta region must provide employment opportunities, education platforms and above all an enabling environment for peace to strive in the region.

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