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Assessing Threats in the Niger Delta

By

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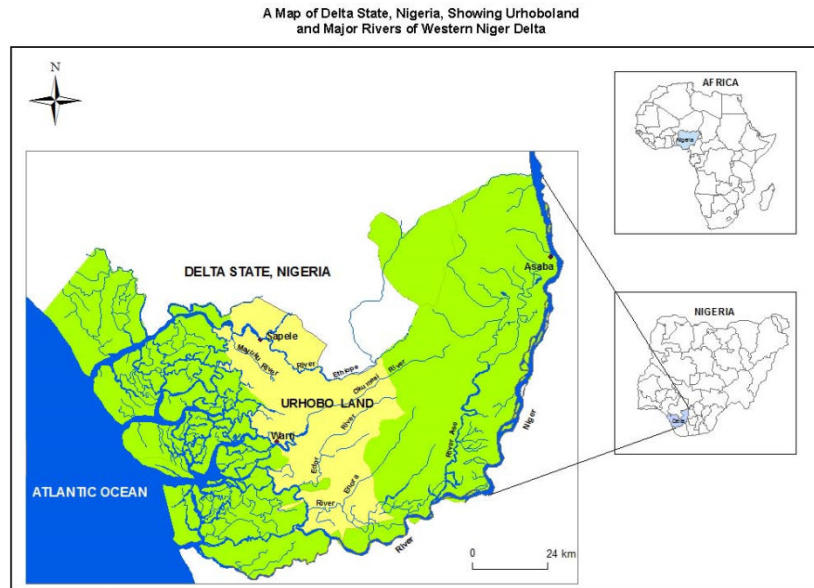
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Although there is a sense of optimism surrounding the situation in the Delta at the time of writing, this report predicts that unless fundamental disparities between the economic and environmental wellbeing of local populations and the profits made by transnational oil companies are rectified, the underlying driving forces of the conflict will continue to fester. Future flare-ups in the conflict can be expected to have greater geographic and destructive scope, following the trend-lines of the pre-amnesty/ceasefire period. To fully drain the swamp of conflict, the underlying problems that drive the conflict will have to be seriously addressed. Such a process is likely to take decades, rather than the weeks it has been since the amnesty/ceasefire. Expect more conflict and unrest to drive the political economic situation in the Delta in the medium to long-term.



INTRODUCTION

The Niger Delta region of Nigeria is oil-rich and security-poor. It contains, for example, as much or more oil and gas riches as the Persian Gulf, and experts predict that within 15 years it could be the sight of 25 percent of global production. At the same time, however, the International Maritime Bureau now ranks it as a higher risk for piracy than even the waters off Somalia. Yet, piracy is only one amidst an array of different threats confronted by multinational oil companies operating in the region that span a spectrum from simple sabotage and petty theft to kidnappings and bombings resulting in large-scale destruction and death.

Due to concerns about the safety and security of the vast natural energy resources in the Delta, the United States has declared the surrounding Gulf of Guinea an area of “strategic national interest.”¹ The U.S. military has also recently concluded a series of war games to plan for a possible response to a crisis scenario in which the Nigerian Government is on the brink of collapse and a violent struggle for control of the Delta oil fields erupts between rival factions and rebel groups.² So while it tends to be firms that feel the frontline effects of instability in the region, even the world’s superpower is keeping close tabs on the geopolitical implications of a complete unravelling of Nigeria that begins in its crucial Delta region.

To put it mildly, foreign oil company operations in the region are high-risk and potentially high-reward ventures. In 2008 there were approximately 92 attacks on the oil industry, which was up about a third from 2007. Such attacks brought with them approximately 1000 deaths in the first 9 months of 2008, and cost Nigeria at least \$23 billion in oil theft, sabotage, and what is known as shut in production – when the oil stays in the ground due to security threats to infrastructure or the personnel that operate such facilities.³ In June of 2008 an attack on Royal Dutch Shell’s

¹ Patrick J. Paterson, “Maritime Security in the Gulf of Guinea,” *JFQ Forum* 45, 2(2007), 28.

² Daniel Volman, “U.S. Military Holds War Games on Nigeria, Somalia,” *All Africa* (14 August 2009).

³ International Crisis Group, “Nigeria: Seizing the Moment in the Niger Delta,” *Africa Briefing*, No 60 (30 April 2009), 2.

Bonga off-shore oilfield shattered the sense of security that offshore rigs had enjoyed until that point. The attack took place more than 60-miles from land, far outside the range of what most analysts believed were the limits of the militants. In June 2009 there were three attacks against Shell pipelines (at Adamakiri and Kula) and off-shore oil fields (Ofima) in River State, which until that point had been outside of the usual area for such attacks in the western Delta.⁴ This suggests that should there be a next round of violence, it will be more widespread as militants in the region extend their geographical and operational range, a subject that will be taken up in the conclusion of this report.

Despite the prominence of saboteurs, pirates, kidnappers, insurgents, drug dealers, and arms kingpins in the region, there is at the moment some reason to be cautiously optimistic about the security situation in the Niger Delta. In May of 2009 the Nigerian Government's Joint Task Force troops – made up of Army, Navy, Air Force, and mobile police – began a serious campaign against militant bases in the region. In response, the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) declared an “all-out war” on foreign oil producers in the region, and on 14 May 2009 told all oil companies and their employees to evacuate within 24-hours if they wanted to “avoid being part of the statistic of an emerging civil war.”⁵ Months of violence followed, resulting in considerable (though difficult to estimate due to the lack of verifiable data) deaths, thousands being uprooted from their homes, and environmental destruction of global significance. By the end of June, Reuters news agency estimated that the conflict had “forced at least 133,000 b/d of Nigeria’s production to be shut down.”⁶ Perhaps due to the extraordinary effects the conflict was having on Nigerian production, more than anything else, President Umaru Yar-Adua offered amnesty to the militants of the Delta in the hope that some 20,000 of them would lay down their arms in exchange for an unconditional pardon from the Federal Government. The offer was made on 25 June 2009, and the period of grace was set to end on 4 October. The grace period has been extended.

The reason for this is that it appears to have had a significant impact on reducing the level of conflict in the region. As a result of the amnesty and the release and pardon of Henry Okah, MEND’s previously incarcerated figurehead leader, MEND declared a ceasefire on 15 July.⁷ The ceasefire appears to have held up relatively well to date (time of writing late October 2009), which is why the amnesty remains in place. The government is hopeful that more and more militants will ‘come out of the creeks’ and turn in their weapons for a chance at rehabilitation and reintegration into Nigerian society.

To give a sense of the tenuousness of the amnesty/ceasefire situation, however, it should be kept in mind that on the same day the ceasefire was declared, MEND attacked a crucial product terminal for oil tankers in Lagos (Atlas Cove Jetty), killing five workers. The explosion was said to reverberate across the entire city of 16 million people, and it marked the first time that militants had extended their battle lines into Nigeria’s main city, which is situated well outside the Delta region. That night a Chevron facility was also targeted and apparently destroyed just a

⁴ “Shell Confirms Third Attack on Nigerian Operations,” Dow International News (21 June 2009).

⁵ “Nigerian Militants Warn Oil Firms,” *The Oil Daily* (14 May 2009). MEND, which emerged in early 2006, has a fluctuating membership numbering between 5,000 and 10,000. These militants are well trained and have a formidable arsenal that has proven itself in numerous instances against federal forces in skirmishes and sustained battles in the Delta region.

⁶ Matthew Green, “Nigeria Offers Amnesty to Delta Militants,” *Financial Times* (26 June 2009).

⁷ Tom Burgis, “Nigerian Militants declare 60 Day Ceasefire,” *Financial Times* (15 July 2009).

few weeks after it had been struck previously and repair work had gotten the facility back up and running.⁸

To suggest also that MEND is somehow a coherent vertically organized and disciplined organization that is capable of imposing a ceasefire through orders from the top would also be a gross misreading of the situation. MEND is an umbrella organization and there are within it fierce rivalries for command and control over regional factions.⁹ Moreover, MEND (and its various sub-sets) is far from a purely political organization geared towards the single-minded cause of liberating the Delta from exploitation at the hands of transnational oil companies. The criminal element of the group lies only barely below the surface and on many occasions has unabashedly bubbled to the top. Many analysts look at MEND's political claims with a deep sense of skepticism, and tend to regard the group's political claims as merely a good cover story for highly lucrative criminal activities related to black market oil theft.

Such a view of MEND and the militants of the Delta is, however, far too simplistic and convenient a dismissal of the roots of this conflict. History is a driving force in the Delta that must be constantly kept in mind when attempting to assess present threats and future stability. Oil extraction in the region has generated an estimated \$600 billion since the 1960s when it began. But this vast wealth has not been shared properly with the local populations of the Delta region. Home to some 31 million people, the majority of whom live in poverty, the region suffers from what the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has described as "administrative neglect, crumbling social infrastructure and services, high unemployment, social deprivation, abject poverty, filth and squalor, and endemic conflict."¹⁰ These conditions and the history of corruption, greed, and exploitation that led to them form the roots of any explanation of the fact that though an estimated \$3.5 billion is spent on security annually in the Delta Region, about a fifth of Nigeria's oil output has been lost to this sort of violence over the last three years. Though a detailed unfolding of this history is well beyond the scope of this report, an appreciation of these conditions must stand as the basis for any threat assessment of the region.

A note on methodology must be made from the outset. This report is based primarily on secondary-source material and informal discussions with experts on the subject matter. Due to the unrest in the Delta region, accurate and reliable intelligence is difficult to come by. On top of this, due to the relative remoteness of the Delta region and the labyrinth of lakes, creeks, swamps, rivers, and militant camps amongst the pipelines and platforms, details of the fighting between the members of MEND and the JTF are often only reported second-hand, and most of the specifics come from spokespersons for the combatants themselves, who infuse the details with rhetoric, exaggeration, and falsities in an effort to win the spin battle in the international press. MEND's campaign is based on intimidation of foreigners, and as a result has a vested interest in making as much out of their attacks as possible. Accordingly, it is commonplace to read outright denials of MEND's claimed attacks by spokespersons from the JTF. In the same way transnational oil companies and local communities often engage in wars of words about the extent to which oil spills and other forms of environmental damage are the result of negligence

⁸ Ofonime Umanah, "Mend Attacks Chevron Again," *All Africa* (13 July 2009).

⁹ International Crisis Group, "The Swamps of Insurgency: Nigeria's Delta Unrest," *Africa Report No. 115* (3 August 2006), 1.

¹⁰ UNDP, *Niger Delta Human Development Report* (2006). Cited in "Nigeria: Petroleum, Pollution and Poverty in the Niger Delta," (2009). Available: <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/AFR44/017/2009/en/e2415061-da5c-44f8-a73c-a7a4766ee21d/afr440172009en.pdf>. Internet.

on the part of the companies, or criminal acts of sabotage on the part of the communities. Independent assessments of the region from think tanks or non-governmental organizations are limited.

Nevertheless, based on as balanced an assessment of the available materials as possible, the remainder of this brief report outlines three related streams of what might be deemed the overall “threat” to foreign oil operations in the region. The three threat streams relate to: (1) human and environmental security; (2) infrastructure security; and (3) reputational security. All are closely related; this report will deal with each in turn.

The primary way in which each of the threat streams are related is through the fact that they stem from the same essential source; namely, the tensions that have arisen between the impoverished indigenous populations and foreign oil companies extracting relative fortunes from on and off-shore sights in the region. In recent years, this tension has manifested itself most prominently in the form of the militant group known as MEND. As mentioned above, MEND has been the source of a significant array of predatory activities in the region that are aimed at, and related to, the foreign oil presence. Kidnappings, bombings, hijackings, vandalism, and theft have all proven to be within MEND’s repertoire. Though MEND tends to operate in the spotlight, there are criminal networks that are involved in the same types of activities also operating in the area that prefer the shadows. At their core these criminal networks are “pure opportunists who use the issues of the Delta as cover for their bunkering and other criminal activities.”¹¹ Often factions of MEND overlap and interact and are indeed one with these criminal networks. Some of the militant factions are supported by the local communities within which they live; others are at odds with these communities. Some of the militant factions are at odds with local governors; others have long been involved in taking bribes and arms and carrying out acts that have resulted in the elections of these governors. Accordingly, the extent to which these activities can be classified as criminally or politically motivated is difficult to unravel. From an immediate threat assessment point of view, there is little point in even trying. It is only in attempting to look further afield towards a medium-term to long-term assessment of stability in the region that such parsing becomes a necessary part of the analysis. This is a subject that will be touched upon briefly in the conclusion of this report.

1. AT THE BOTTOM OF THE SWAMP

Over the last 25 years a guerilla conflict has taken shape in the Delta region. This conflict sees hundreds dead and thousands displaced each year after centuries of foreign-led efforts to extract the riches from the tropical swamps and rivers of the area have culminated in this struggle for resource control. This conflict is a long ways from being a straightforward, two-sided, “us against them” affair. The Nigerian State is powerfully influenced by a class of elites that facilitate the operations of the foreign oil firms upon which it depends almost entirely for revenues. This privatization of the state has led one academic to describe Nigeria’s governing apparatus as a “rentier state.”¹² And while there are intense ethnic cleavages in the region, it is possible to surmise that the one common bond amongst the people of the Delta region is the sense that the federal government has little concern for their fate. The people of the Delta feel

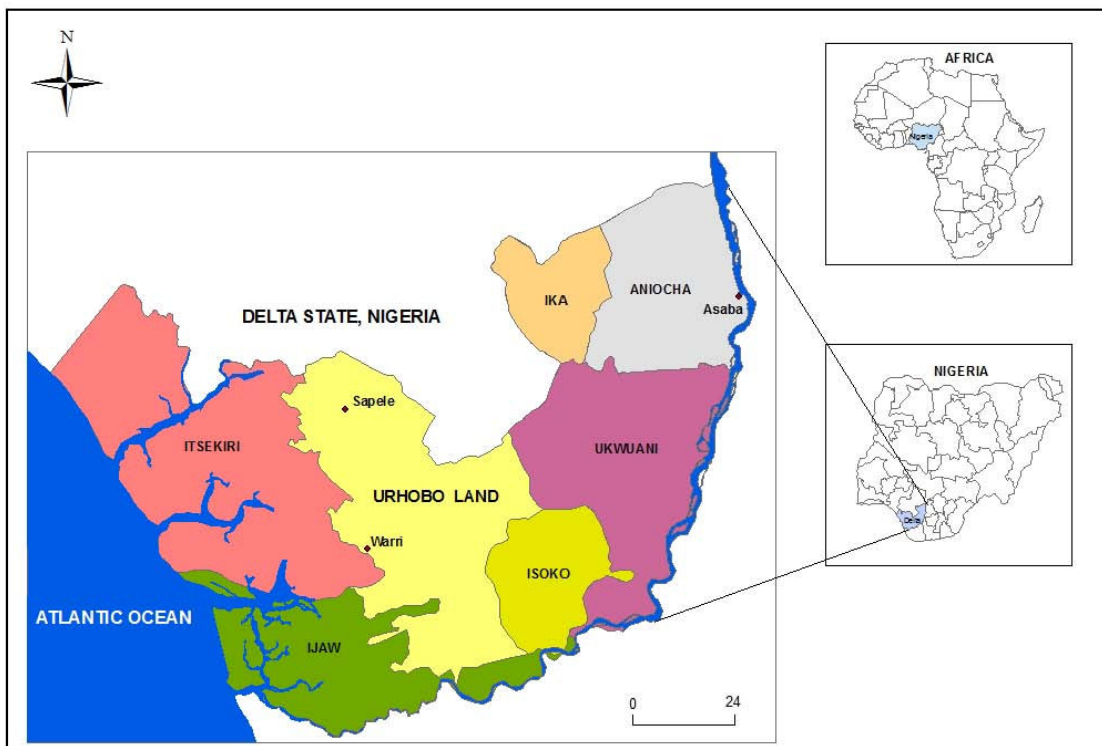
¹¹ David Smock, “Crisis in the Niger Delta,” USIPEACE BRIEFING (September 2009), 3.

¹² Shola Omotola, “The Next Gulf? Oil Politics, Environmental Apocalypse and Rising Tension in the Niger Delta,” *Occasional Paper Series*, 1, 3 (African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes, 2006), 7.

disenfranchised by the fact that the federal government is more beholden to foreign oil companies than its own citizens.¹³

One of the strange side effects of this is that it has been the oil companies themselves that have stepped in to fill the development gap in the region in order to be able to continue extraction and production. This is no easy task due to the hostile geography of the region, and the fact that transnational oil companies have little in the way of a natural mandate to carry out such acts of 'corporate social responsibility;' however, with more and more attention being focused on the region by environmental and human rights groups, and with a greater awareness amongst transnational oil companies of the necessity of maintaining an image of responsibility in the information age, engaging in such Community Development Projects (CDPs) and trying to generate 'community buy-in' has become an essential part of what companies are calling their 'social license to operate'.¹⁴

A Map of Delta State, Nigeria, Showing Urhoboland and Other Ethnic Nationalities



Map drawn by Professor Francis Odemerho, Southern Illinois University, Edwardsville, USA

Copyright: Urhobo Historical Society 2008

Government officials have repeatedly been accused of favouring foreign oil corporations over their own impoverished citizens, since oil revenues and kickbacks astronomically exceed the

¹³ Judith Burdin Asuni, "Blood Oil in the Niger Delta," *United States Institute of Peace – Special Report* 229 (August 2009), 3.

¹⁴ Oil companies such as Shell have been involved, for example, in paying out compensation for environmental damages and supplying funds for vocational training for unemployed youth. Construction projects have also taken place on the basis of Shell funding. These have included roads, health centres, and schools. See Shola Omotola, 15.

value of any tax dollars that might come from the Delta states. Foreign oil companies are also deeply distrusted amongst the local populations, especially those who have been accused of engaging in processes of consultation on future CDPs with local communities in an effort to generate support for extraction enterprises, and then failing to follow through on these CDPs, leaving local communities once again powerless and in the lurch.

Broken promises, environmental destruction, pillaging of oil resources, unfair wealth distributions resulting in massive class imbalances and disenfranchisement, on top of endemic poverty, poor health conditions, and low employment prospects are all at the bottom of the dilemma in the Delta.

2. HUMAN AND ENVIRONMENTAL SECURITY

After the mid-May attacks on Camp 5 in Delta state, Shell Petroleum Development Company began evacuations of their personnel from the area, and Chevron Nigeria Limited confined the movement of their personnel to their facility. The mid-May escalation in the conflict reportedly led to at least one death of a hostage being held by MEND at Camp 5, and MEND itself claimed that a number of other hostages were killed in the crossfire between itself and the JTF.¹⁵ As an aside to that point, Delta state had been relatively peaceful for an extended period, and had been something of a model for peace projects in the area. Its descent into a conflict zone was interpreted by journalists and analysts as a significant indicator of the general state of instability throughout the Delta region. That being said, four Ukrainian hostages were rescued by JTF soldiers in their raid of Camp five around the 17th of May, and 13 other hostages of Filipino and Nigerian descent were also said to have been rescued from Camp 5.¹⁶

The kidnapping tactic seems to be employed equally by militants and criminals. This tactic was initiated in 2006 by MEND and has clearly become increasingly popular, as the 2009 totals are already a 70 percent increase on 2008.¹⁷ While their purposes apparently differ, the essential kidnapping threat posed to western personnel from militants and criminals remains the same. There have been more than 500 reported kidnappings in 2009. The targets of these heinous acts have expanded to include children and religious figures, and almost all of the kidnappings in Nigeria have taken place in the Delta region. After death, this is the most grievous threat to human security for foreign oil companies operating in Nigeria. Given the dramatic increase in kidnappings, likely brought on by the fact that criminal organizations have come to view kidnapping for ransom as an effective way to bring in large payouts, this is an issue that must be taken very seriously by foreign oil companies seeking to ensure the safety of their personnel.

Beyond this, there are serious day-to-day health concerns that must be taken into account as a result of the cumulative effects of incessant oil spills and gas flaring that has produced the iconic symbols of the Niger Delta conflict: controlled infernos that illuminate night skies throughout the region.¹⁸ According to the U.S. Department of Energy, Nigeria flares about 43% of the gas it produces, which in 2007 cost the country USD \$1.46 Billion in lost revenue.¹⁹ The available

¹⁵ Emma Amaize, "JTF, Militants in all out war," *Vanguard* (Nigeria) (17 May 2009). Ahmefula Ogbu, Omon-Julius Onabu and Segun James, "JTF Rescues More Hostages," *All Africa* (18 May 2009).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Camillus Eboh, "Kidnappings on the Rise in Nigeria, over 500 so far" *Reuters News* (22 July 2009).

¹⁸ Human Rights Watch, "The Human Rights Impact of Local Government Corruption and Mismanagement in Rivers State, Nigeria," Vol 19, No. 2(A) (January 2007), 22.

¹⁹ United States Department of Energy, Energy Information Administration, "Country Analysis Briefs: Nigeria," (May 2009). Available: <http://www.eia.doe.gov/emeu/cabs/Nigeria/Background.html>. Internet.

data on spillage issues are sparse and unlikely to be particularly accurate, but one analyst has suggested that “over 2 million barrels of oil were spilled into the country’s terrestrial, coastal and offshore marine environment,” during the period between 1976 and 1999.²⁰ More recent numbers are coloured by the fierce debate about the causes of oil spills.

Shell, ChevronTexico and Ajip tend to attribute the majority of spills surrounding their facilities to sabotage conducted by local residents in search of financial compensation. In 2000, for example, Shell reported that of the 340 distinct spills that accounted for some 30,751 barrels lost into the natural environment, 57 percent could be attributed to acts of sabotage. In 2006, Shell recorded 241 separate spill incidents, up from 224 in the previous year. Sabotage accounted for the vast majority of these incidents (69 percent), while 20 percent were deemed controllable incidents, and the remainder had yet to be classified.²¹

The other side of the debate, which is defended by the oil-bearing communities and environmentalists, has tended to dismiss the notion that sabotage is so widespread. Instead, they suggest that the transnational oil companies have conveniently exaggerated sabotage as a way to dodge legal liabilities and payments to local communities. Seeking to camouflage their own fault and indiscretion with the conflict and endemic poverty in the region, the transnational oil companies use the cover of sabotage as a way of shirking responsibility for faults of their own and the extended use of decrepit pipeline that was laid in the 1960s and 1970s.²² The statistics from this side of the debate are accordingly much different. This side of the debate attributes 50 percent of spills to corrosion of oil pipelines.²³

Regardless of how one parses the numbers, these spills and flares have had devastating effects on the local ecology and the indigenous economy. It has gotten to the point where “farmlands and rivers can no longer sustain soil nutrients and aquatic resources,”²⁴ and the food chain has been contaminated to such an extent that local residents complain that the fish they catch after spills smell and taste of petrol.²⁵ They have done severe damage to the livelihood and health of the 7 million people trying to scrape together a living through peasant agriculture and fishing, to say nothing of the overall effects on global warming and the general ecological decay of the planet.

²⁰ Shola Omotola, 10.

²¹ Shell Nigeria Annual Report 2006, “People and the Environment,” Available: http://narcosphere.narconews.com/userfiles/70/2006_shell_nigeria_report.pdf. Internet. 14. It should be noted that only SPDC reports annually on the number of spills in its operations.

²² Kenneth Omeje, “Oil Conflict in Nigeria: Contending Issues and Perspectives of the Local Niger Delta People,” *New Political Economy*, 10, 3, (2005), 327.

²³ See for example Chijoke J Evoh, “Green Crimes, Petro-Violence and the Tragedy of Oil: The Case of the Niger Delta in Nigeria,” *In-Spire Journal of Law, Politics and Societies* 4, 1 (2009), 49. In a recent report Amnesty International attempted to arrive at a balanced assessment of these numbers. It was not able to do so in any satisfactory way due to the inadequacies in the reporting regulations for such events in the Delta and the lack of scientific studies of their scale. See their “Nigeria: Petroleum, Pollution and Poverty in the Niger Delta,” (2009). Available: <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/AFR44/017/2009/en/e2415061-da5c-44f8-a73c-a7a4766ee21d/afr440172009en.pdf>. Internet.

²⁴ See Peter C. Nwilo and Olusegun T. Badejo, “Impacts and Management of Oil Spill Pollution along the Nigeria Coastal Areas,” Paper presented at the XX Annual ISPRS Congress, Istanbul 2004. Available: Shola Omotola, 10.

²⁵ Amnesty International, “Nigeria: Petroleum, Pollution and Poverty in the Niger Delta,” (2009). Available: <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/AFR44/017/2009/en/e2415061-da5c-44f8-a73c-a7a4766ee21d/afr440172009en.pdf>. Internet.

Assessing the Threat

For western based foreign oil workers, even temporary deployments to the region will accordingly come with health risks that go well above and beyond anything that would be experienced closer to home. Foreign workers must be aware of the health risks of operating in such an environment, which run the gambit from heart problems, headaches, and skin problems, to kidnapping, prolonged captivity and death.

To put the problem into comparative perspective, Port Harcourt, the capital of Rivers State, is ranked alongside Baghdad, Sana'a and Khartoum, as one of the most dangerous cities in the world.²⁶ For foreign workers, only Baghdad is as dangerous. One webpage run by ex-patriots living in Nigeria estimates that since 2006, an average of two foreign workers have been kidnapped for ransom each week.

3. INFRASTRUCTURE SECURITY

Oil Bunkering is clearly the main threat to infrastructure in the region. Besides the fact that between 30,000 and 300,000 barrels of oil are stolen per day from the region, one of the key ways in which the oil theft occurs poses a serious threat to the pipelines in the region. The enabling environment for such widespread criminal activity has, in many ways, been outlined above. It is worth, however, adding the high number of unemployed youths in the Niger Delta, the ineffective and corrupt law enforcement officials, the lack of serious punishment for those caught or suspected of this activity, the ease with which threats or other forms of compulsion or bribery can convince oil company staff to become involved in the activity, and, most importantly, "the presence of an established international market for stolen oil, which includes West African (...), Moroccan, Venezuelan, Lebanese, French, and Dutch partners."²⁷ This bunkering activity, of course, takes place within a culture of endemic corruption as Nigeria, and particularly the Delta Region, are amongst the most corrupt places on the planet.

Three Types of Oil Bunkering

Type 1

Small Scale – usually takes place at the hands of local people, and is driven predominantly by poverty and desperation. Stolen oil at this scale is destined for the local market. Small scale local refineries had even popped up to process the stolen oil for local use, but were shut down by government (JTF) forces in early 2009.

Type 2

Siphoning – the form of bunkering involves the actual hacking into and tapping of wellheads. This involves removing the "Christmas Tree" and attaching a hose to siphon the crude oil into barrels which are then placed on barges and sent to sea. There, they are unloaded and exchanged for cash, arms, drugs, or some combination thereof. This type of bunkering involves international criminal syndicates that play roles in financing the local criminals, transporting the stolen oil to black markets, and laundering the proceeds. Amongst numerous others from elsewhere on the planet (Lebanon in particular), "many top Nigerian politicians and military

²⁶ Dulue Mbachu, "Nigeria's Kidnap Capital Forces Shell, Chevron to Cut Output," Bloomberg.com News – Africa (18 February 2009). Available: <http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=20601116&sid=aKxpQiFk9AkM&refer=africa>. Internet.

²⁷ Judith Burdin Asuni, "Blood Oil in the Niger Delta," *United States Institute of Peace – Special Report* 229 (August 2009), 4.

officers, both serving and retired, are said by internal sources, such as the army chief of staff, to be actively involved in the large-scale bunkering business.”²⁸

Type 3

Excess Lifting – this involves using forged bills of lading to lift crude oil beyond the licensed amount. This usually involves corrupt oil company staff and high ranking government officials who are responsible for issuing the lifting contracts. This mode of bunkering also involves international players and international black markets and takes place at a much grander scale than the first type.

Threat Assessment

To give a sense of the effects that the current amnesty/ceasefire is having on the bunkering aspect of the Delta dilemma, consider the following anecdote. One of the Delta Region’s most infamous oil bunkerers – a man named Ateke Tom – had gone so far as to divert a pipeline to his own fortified compound deep in the creeks in order to more easily go about his pilfering. Ateke Tom has, as a result of the Amnesty, emerged from the creeks, and his own personal pipeline has been re-diverted back to its original purpose.

This being said, all three types of bunkering are likely to continue despite the amnesty/ceasefire and the temporary stability that seems to have been realized in the region. This is expected due to the alternative sources of motivation that drive this sort of activity. In the case of type 1 bunkering, this is an economically motivated crime, driven by underdevelopment and unemployment in the region. Type 2 and 3 bunkering are functions of organized crime syndicates that involve aspects of the Nigerian state apparatus, local criminals, and transnational criminal organizations. It is therefore expected that bunkering will continue even in the absence of other forms of violence and conflict in the region.

4. REPUTATIONAL SECURITY

As has been suggested above, the complex and often corrupt relationships between militants, government security forces, and transnational oil companies make the Delta a political and economic wasps’ nest, with the locals being the most likely to get stung.

Government security forces have been responsible for indiscriminate killings in the past (1990, Umuechem, Rivers State – 80 killed, hundreds of houses burned to the ground; 1999 Odi, Bayelsa State – estimates range from 23 to 2,483 dead and missing; 2005 Odioma, Bayelsa – at least 17 killed, with rapes and burnings reported).²⁹ There is also today, as a result of this dark history, a deep fear of these forces amongst the local inhabitants of the Delta who suspect that they are deployed not for the protection of the people, but of the transnational oil companies. Due to the complex relationship between the state and the oil companies, this suspicion is not unfounded, nor has it gone unexplored by independent groups seeking to understand the extent of the relationship.

The International Crisis Group has done the most significant research on this issue. The group’s findings, which are based on field research and interviews on the ground in places like Port Harcourt, suggest that due to insecurity in the region, multinationals are not only paying government forces high sums and providing perks to navy, army and police installations

²⁸ Judith Burdin Asuni, 5.

²⁹ International Crisis Group, “The Swamps of Insurgency: Nigeria’s Delta Unrest,” *Africa Report No. 115* (3 August 2006), 6-7.

deployed to protect their installations, but they are also paying militants high sums to carry out what is euphemistically described as “surveillance.” Surveillance in this context means that militants, for a sum, agree not to attack a certain company’s pipelines and flow stations or workers. To disguise the payouts to militant groups, companies often route them through third party contractors, who dress up the payments as community development projects or waste removal contracts.³⁰

Threat Assessment

More and more, multinational corporations are investing millions in preserving an image of corporate social and environmental responsibility. The need to wage these types of public relations campaigns has arisen due to the rise of non-governmental watchdogs such as Amnesty International, Greenpeace, and Human Rights Watch. Operating in the information age, the findings of reports from these groups can reach billions in seconds and do severe damage to the image of a corporation caught on the wrong side of an environmental or human rights violation.

Therefore, one of the biggest challenges of doing business in the Delta is to do it in a way that is immune to charges of corruption and environmental violation, or worse, involvement in fuelling a violent insurgency in a foreign country. Amidst the endemic corruption in Nigeria and the unstable security situation, staying ‘above the fray’ while maintaining a secure and prosperous operation is perhaps the biggest challenge multinational oil companies face in the region.

One of the advantages of operating in a conflict zone, such as the Delta was prior to the ceasefire/amnesty of mid-Summer 2009, is that few NGOs risk putting people on the ground to investigate what is ‘really going on.’ Accordingly, should a prolonged stability take hold in the Delta, it could be expected that more and more of these groups will take aim at the Delta as a place worth investigating. Moreover, one could easily expect a greater number of intrepid reporters venturing deeper into the Delta from accredited western news agencies.

5. THE FUTURE OF THE DELTA SECURITY SITUATION

“Nigeria is a sick country, governed by sick leaders who have no consideration for the masses.”
--Spokesperson for the Joint Revolutionary Council, Cynthia Whyte, 21 May 2009.³¹

As the beginning of this paper suggested, there is a sense of optimism surrounding the situation in the Delta at the time of writing. The extent to which the optimism is warranted is of course difficult to predict. Political Scientists and Strategic Analysts don’t have crystal balls into which they can look to see the future; however, a clear-headed view of the key variables that have caused the chaos in the Delta over the last years does suggest that the amnesty/ceasefire of the moment is but a band-aid solution to what’s really at the root of the Delta’s problems. Militants can come out of the creeks, turn in their arms for money or amnesty or both, enroll in state sponsored rehabilitation and reintegration programs, but amidst a population of 31 million a few thousand militants represents only the surface level of unrest in the region. Unless fundamental disparities between the economic and environmental wellbeing of local populations and the profits made by transnational oil companies are rectified, the underlying driving forces of the conflict will continue to fester. The Nigerian Government will need to start putting its own people first, and the transnational oil companies will need to encourage this realignment in allegiances, or production will continue to suffer, infrastructure will continue to be targeted,

³⁰ International Crisis Group, 9-10.

³¹ “Niger Delta-War Spreads to Ondo, Edo, Bayelsa,” *All Africa* (21 May 2009).

'blood oil' bunkering will continue to finance further criminal activity and militant arms build-ups, and long-term stability will continue to elude the region.

Future flare-ups in the conflict can be expected to have greater geographic and destructive scope, following the trend-lines of the pre-amnesty/ceasefire period.

The future of MEND itself should not be looked towards as an indicator of the future of the region. The militant/insurgent movement in that region has much deeper and longer roots than MEND. Even if key leaders of the organization choose to participate in the amnesty offer, the chances of this actually 'decapitating' the insurgency are very slim. To fully drain the swamp of conflict, the underlying problems that drive the conflict will have to be seriously addressed. Such a process is likely to take decades, rather than the weeks it has been since the amnesty/ceasefire. Expect more conflict and unrest to drive the political economic situation in the Delta in the medium to long-term.

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