
Kidnapping in the Niger-Delta Region of Nigeria: Issues and Challenges

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Abstract

National security in a narrow sense is concerned with defense from external attack and security from internal dissolution. The restive region of the Niger Delta with its rising of militancy has been one of the centers where youths are mobilized and armed to carry acts of hostage taking. Such acts have been the aftermath of age long marginalization, poor standard of living, environmental degradation and deplorable economic conditions. However, in recent times, hostage taking has turned to be more of a political instrument with a political language, thus having serious implications for national security. In Nigeria, beside revealing the insecurity of the domestic environment, it shows that our oil rich country is faced with exceptional issues of under-development which now threatens its very existence. The implication of this is the fact that it makes the domestic environment quite unsafe for investors. The central argument of this paper is that miscalculations in the lengths of these actions have the tendency of throwing the whole country into a general state of insecurity. To this end a comprehensive plan is necessary for the complete development of the Niger Delta as well as regions of the country so as to reduce, if not end the threat posed to national security.

Part of the fundamental responsibilities of any government is the ability to secure its territory from external and internal threats. In view of its importance, governments globally are empowered by law to create agencies with which to ensure that people and their properties are well secured. (Eric and Joseph 2010). In Nigeria, the case is similar. The 1999 constitution in section 14 (2) (b) specifically saddles the government with task of securing the citizens and their assets. To assist the government in carrying out this important responsibility, the drafters of the constitution includes section 214 (1) which relates to the creation of the Nigeria police force for the maintenance of law and order, (Eric and Joseph 2010). But while this institution is in

place, it seems to have been overwhelmed by the security challenge in the country. The ocre of insecurity, characterized by violent crimes is threatening the cooperate existence of the country. The latest of these crimes is kidnapping for ransom.

Until few years ago, Kidnapping for ransom was a distant crime. Aside from isolate cases of kidnapping for ritual purposes, the closest the nation ever got to a major kidnap was the July 5, 1984 botched attempt in London by the Military Government to kidnap Former Transport Minister, Umaru Dikko.

(Akasike 2008) observed that shortly-after the re-establishment of democratic governance in 1999, kidnapping formally came to the country. It was initially adopted by the Niger-Delta militants as a tool of ideological struggle, but it has now become a major source of livelihood.

As the problem grew into a national security crisis, the initial targets and victims were mainly foreigners working in the oil and gas industry, but the kidnapers have since expand ed their areas of coverage to include indigenous citizens, particularly relatives and family members of wealthy people who the kidnapers believe can afford the random. (Akasike 2008).

Bothered by this development, the study is aimed at examining the cause of this social menace, its socio-economic implication for the country and advancing ways of ending it.

Definition of Concept

Defining what kidnapping is poses a number of definitional problems in relation to a country's legal and moral viewpoints as well as the availability of other variances such as hostage taking and hijacking.

(Clutteibuck 1987) in his work, kidnap, hijack and extortion, attempted to clarify some terminological differences between kidnapping, hostage-taking and hijacking. He argued that where hostage taking and hijacking are concerned, victims are held in a known location such as plane, ship or building. Kidnapping on the other hand he argues applies to all situations where they are held against their will in unlawful confinements.

(Turner 1998) has attempted a documentation of how kidnapping originated. According to him, the term "kidnapping" originated in the 17th century England where children were "kidnapped" and often sold as slaves or agricultural workers to colonial farmers. He further argues that emperor Constantine became so alarmed by the incidence of kidnapping that he ordered death penalthly as punishment for the crime.

The United National Office of Drugs and Crime, has categorized kidnapping as follows: kidnapping for extortion (for ransom, to influence business decisions or to obtain commercial advantage); kidnapping between or within criminal groups (for debt recovery or to secure advantage in criminal market); kidnapping for sexual exploitation; Kidnapping linked to domestic or family disputes (Spouse or Child abduction) and kidnapping for political or ideological purposes. (Mohammed 2008)

As observed by (Townsend 2008), in Nigeria, kidnapping has of recent, assumed alarming dimension in most states of Southern Nigeria particularly in the Niger Delta region. The root and rise in Kidnapping in Nigeria's Niger Delta can be traced to what Townsend referred to as "natural resource nationalism. The tendency to seek bigger shares of the returns from natural resources; it is also compounded by what Omeje termed "Accumulation Politics" the tendency for the ruling class to be involved in endless accumulation of natural resource rents accruing from the region through deliberate act of marginalism and deprivation. (Omeje 2005).

Kidnapping and the State of the Nation

Kidnapping has of recent assumed an alarming dimension in most of the south Eastern and Niger Delta regions of Nigeria. Its occurrence and impact was induced by oil resource exploration in the country. On January 11th 2006, what appeared to be the first reported case of abduction of expatriates took place when four Foreign Oil workers working for Shell Petroleum were kidnapped by militants in Port Harcourt. This resulted in a further cut-back of 120,000 barrels per day in crude oil production (Tunde 2008)

On January 15th, 2006, ten persons including soldiers of the military joint task force deployed by the government to the Niger-Delta region (operation restore hope) were killed. Tuned, further observed that on February, 9 2007, what appeared to be a major warning to the government and citizens was announced by the militants when they vowed to extend hostilities beyond the Niger-Delta region to other parts of the country. They also warned all expatriates to leave Nigeria with immediate effect and on that same day, the American Cable News Network (CNN) reported that there were no fewer than 200,000 named militants in the Niger-Delta region.

The kidnapping went on and on, between March 15 to May 16 when the official residence of Nigeria's former Vice-President (Goodluck Jonathan) was bombed but his mother miraculously escaped through a boat unhurt. On the later part of June 2007, some militants kidnapped a 4 year old Nigerian girl while on her way to school but she was released after several appeals from the Nigerian president and well wishers.

The most prominent thing about these kidnappings is that large amount of money is paid as ransom before their victims are released, however most of these victims are usually released unhurt though there are many sad tales from victims.

According to (Augustine 2010), sometimes around July 2010, three journalists were kidnapped at gunpoint. They were traveling back in an NUJ official vehicle. They were abducted around Aba (in Abia State) as they were returning from a national executive meeting of the union in Uyo the capital of Akwa Ibom State. They kidnappers demanded a ransom of 250 million naira. The police spokesman for Abia state Ali Okechukwu confirmed that the police had received a report on the abducted journalists. He said further, that kidnapping for ransom is common in Abia and Akwa Ibom two neighboring states in the volatile but oil-rich Niger-Delta.

The sanctity of the church could not deter kidnappers from carrying out their act. Abduction of Mrs. Stella Chinwe Odiegwu, wife of the former Managing Director of Nigerian Breweries Plc Mr. Festus Odimegwu on March 14 was another case of kidnapping in when Cathedral, (Kunle 2010). Mrs. Odimegwu had gone for an early-morning mass at a Catholic Church in her hometown Assa-Ubirielem, Orsu Local Government Area of Imo State, escorted by three mobile police men. The kidnappers numbering about 25, stormed into the Church and abducted her after engaging her police escort in a gun battle. This outrage is only the latest in a series of kidnappings in Imo State, which have also involved the abduction of a judge, a traditional ruler's wife etc. Odimegwu's tribulations show that an armed body guard is no protection against a band of determined criminals. Their ability to track her movements without detection is an indication of an operational intelligence which the country's security forces apparently cannot match.

Bothered by this development, some South-Eastern States, the region most hit, have devised stiffer punishment for kidnapping. As at the least count Abia, Akwa Ibom, Enugu, Anambra, Imo and Rivers States have either passed the death penalty legislations for the offence of kidnapping or lsoe at the concluding stages of making kidnapping a capital offence. (Eric and Joseph 2010).

These measures however seem not to be achieving results as case of kidnapping are on the increase. The helplessness of the various governments and their security agencies in the face of his menace has caused many to query the adequacy of the nations' laws. Some critics have attributed the problem to social causes, combined with an inefficient police force. Those who ascribe social causes to kidnapping argue that it is a symptom of a bigger problem that can only be solved through a holistic approach. (Eric and Joseph 2010) .

There is also the problem of the police force whose morale and professionalism have been devastated by low pay, outdated equipment and poor working conditions to the extent that they have become willing accomplices of armed robbers and kidnapers. They argued that there are enough laws in the nation's statute books that could appropriately punish kidnapers, but that what is required of those in authority is the will to act.

Causes of Kidnapping in Nigeria

There are many factors that have contributed to the emergence of kidnapping in Nigeria. Apart from the wider liberation consciousness or struggle of the people over the years, social, economic and political reasons have come to play prominent roles for the rise in recent times. These factors explored under separate headings as follows.

a. **Kidnapping as a Liberation Struggle**

Early versions of kidnapping were delivered to be part of a wider liberation struggle by the Movement for the Emancipation of Niger Delta (MEND) for the development of their region. It was then an activity with no monetary attachment. The key grievances often advanced by MEND for such confrontations involved two closely inter-related issues namely:

That the issue of Natural resource control and self determination be recognized and operationalized as cardinal principles for the protection of their minority status. Secondly that the appropriate institutional and financial arrangement be put in place for the development as well as addressing the numerous environmental problems associated with oil exploration and exploitation in the oil producing region (Nseabasi 2009). The refusal of the Federal Government to respond to these demands have been at the core of MEND's liberation struggle. These struggle have historical roots in Isaac Adaka Boro and Ken Saro Wiwa's earlier concerns and struggles for resource control and environmental justice. It was believed that the execution of Ken Saro Wiwa by the Federal Government on the 10th November, 1995, has played key and fundamental role in foisting MEND's strength and determination for such liberation struggle. (Nseabasi 2009).

b. Those who ascribed social causes of Kidnapping attributed it to bad economy and high level of unemployment. This they argued could be seen in what has happened in the banking and communication industry. (Eric and Joseph 2010). There is hardly any bank that has not sacked a minimum of 2,000 staff in recent time they argued further. Those who are graduating from the universities also come into the already saturated labour force. Such a group of criminals or kidnapers target not only prominent and well-off individuals but also ordinary

citizens who possess little wealth. The common targets include every perceived person with prospects of high and lucrative ransom including teenagers, children and adults alike.

- c. According to (Tzaneli 2006) kidnapers are businessmen, they just happen to be on the illegal side of it. If you deprive them of the demand then there is not going to be any supply. The beginning of 2007 saw the emergence of various other deviant groups by various names who hide under liberation struggle to commit economic crimes. It takes few persons to organize somebody's kidnap. In this case the victim would be snatched and taken to a safe location.
- d. Kidnapping as a sign of failed leadership and poor governance: The rampant kidnapping in the country is a symptom of failed leadership. The kidnapping of the journalists has raised again the issue of not just the gross incompetence on the path of our security agencies but has demonstrated beyond any need for further proof the failure of governance at all levels (Eric and Joseph 2010). This failure is reflected in lack of infrastructure, corruption, waste, pursuit of vanity and the general lack of values.

One common factor that supports this form of kidnapping is the rising incidence of endemic poverty and unemployment mostly in the midst of abundant resources. Oil revenue has sustained the Nigeria economy for many decades accounting for more than 90% of Nigeria's foreign exchange earnings and more than 80% of government revenue. (Nseabasi 2009). Despite these, the inhabitants remain very poor while their source of livelihood depends on the natural environment oftentimes devastated and degraded by oil production.

- e. Kidnapping as a Political Tool: This type of kidnapping is seen as an instrument for political scores. The operation is organized as an instrument for political scores. The operation is organized as targeted mainly at key serving politicians or contractors working directly for government. Once the victim is kidnapped a high level negotiation is expected which will ultimately lead to a very heavy ransom. Such a ransom is used to further political goals, self-settling of aggrieved groups or a way of financial crippling a serving politician. The most notable kidnapping gangs in the Niger Delta today are "used and dumped" political thugs. Most of them were used during election and dumped at swearing in still armed and without any compensation. One the strength of the sophisticated weapons at their disposal, the members regroup, specialize in high profile kidnapping that ever surpasses the capabilities of the state security agents.

Socio – Economic Implication of Kidnapping

Incidences of kidnapping in the Niger Delta region have posed many implications on the Nigerian economy and the south region in particular. As most kidnappings involve foreign works and development partners, the effect on the economy is very enormous as it scares away potential development partners and rob the state of the benefit of such development alliances and opportunities. With a rise in daily cases of kidnapping, it is very clear that available and potential investors are scared of doing business in the region.

At the moment, foreign and local investors in the region have relocate to other neighboring countries. Most oil companies and allied operations have been shut while the volume of investments and capital flows to the region have reduced drastically.

Augustine (2010) believed that kidnapping is a symptom of failed leadership and could scuttle Nigeria's quest for a permanent seat in the United Nations security council.

Ways of Tracking kidnappers

One surest way to overcome this menace is for the government to equip the police well so as to be able ton confront the problem headlong. The response time of the Nigeria police is still not rapid enough to deter kidnappers. Mrs. Odimegwu was kidnapped in front of several people, yet this did not help the police in their efforts to apprehended the culprits. This is an indication that the police are not getting the cooperation from the citizenry which is vital if they are to win the war against kidnapping. Better communication facilities, especially walkie-talkies and more vehicles, would enable the police to react more effectively to emergencies of this type.

Kidnapping is more of a symptom of a failing state and is not likely to abate until government sees it as such and maps out strategies to deal with the problem. There must be equal opportunities for all Nigerians to attain their potentials, the government must also create an enabling atmosphere to make Nigerians engage in businesses without carrying the burden of additional costs by way of providing infrastructure themselves.

The problem of kidnapping can also be addressed through the implementation of stiffer laws. The offence should be treated as a capital offence. Until the government makes kidnapping a capital offence with life imprisonment and additional hard labour even for the political sponsors, tranquility will never be restored.

A sitting police commissioner should be removed once a case of kidnapping is established in his state. There is no reason why the commissioner of police should be

sitting on his seat, if there is kidnapping on daily basis in his state. It means he has failed. It is their primary responsibility, they should be told in very clear terms that he failed to handle the situation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the study observed that the Niger Delta region remains the engine of Nigeria's economy, yet it suffers infrastructural and social in justice. Oil wealth in Nigeria has become synonymous with poverty in the producing regions. These are fundamental issues that have engendered all forms of social disorders. Kidnapping in Nigeria has resulted from the socio-economic and political decadence that the country has been subjected to in the past years. To be able to curb this social evil, there is the need for the government to arrest unemployment stiffer penalty and possibly new laws be enacted.

The paper believes that the Niger Delta problems deserve serious governmental attention. The effort of government is appreciated but such effort will not be successful without genuine stake holder participation and involvement. "Elitist" governance should make room for the inclusion of all layers of stakeholders.

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