

# STATE, OILIFICATION AND COMBATIVE REACTIONISM IN THE NIGER DELTA REGION

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## **Abstract**

Despite the transition- to democratic rule after decades of autocratic praetorianism, widespread crisis of authority, which arises when people lose faith in the existing social order have not altered; leading to frequent violent protests against the state and oil companies in the Niger Delta. The state has „ resorted to more repression to quell the surge of violent conflicts. The insensitivities and lack of viable policy responses by the state underscore the view that acts of protest tend to escalate into violent conflicts because official responses are more likely to be diversionary, repressive, than reformist.

## **Introduction**

Nigeria is Africa's largest oil-producing state and the world's sixth largest exporter of crude oil, with an average daily production of over two million barrels (VCL, 2003). The Niger Delta is synonymous with oil which has for over decades been the linchpin of the Nigerian economy (Watts 2000, 1997; Ikein 1990; Lewis 1996; Khan 1994). Oil in 2006 accounted for 80% of government revenues, 90% of foreign exchange earnings, 96% of export revenues and almost half of GDP. Crude oil production runs currently at more than 2.4 million barrels per day valued at more than \$40 billion at 2006 prices. The oil is lifted mostly from about 250 onshore fields dotting the landscape of the Niger Delta (Watts, 2007). However, after over four decades, oil revenues have not impacted positively on the oil-bearing communities. Oil exploration in Niger Delta has since inception been characterised by the destruction of farmlands, pollution of the environment and the displacement, of entire communities. Thus, while the Niger Delta region has yielded immense wealth for the elites-of the dominant ethnic groups, it has yielded nothing but poverty, disease, and unemployment for the inhabitants. With these contradictions, and being the mainstay of the economy, oil and the oil sector have come under increasing pressure, from the elites of the dominant ethnic groups, who are intent on ensuring a disproportionate share of oil revenues for themselves and from the Niger Delta oil host communities, who bear the brunt of oil exploitation but are obtusely abandoned to abject poverty.

Today, the Niger Delta area is under an unprecedented military siege and unified by collective grief and violence. The advent of democracy in May 1999 seems to have exacerbated rather than ameliorate violent conflicts in the region. The insidious effects of protracted dictatorship has remained perceptible in all facets of governance, despite the 1999 democratic transition, due to the precipitous failure of the present democratic dispensation to improve the state of governance associated with military dictatorship. Significant aspects of this phenomenon have not only endured but in certain cases have actually been ossified. Thus, there has been a perilous resurgence of vitriolic conflicts over religion, ethnicity and resources, producing very high level of insecurity. The conflicts in the oil-host communities in the Niger delta have been particularly fierce and pervasive, an attestation to the depth of frustration and anger prevalent in the region. The state since the 1990s, has implicitly demonstrated strong preference for military coercion to suppress oil-bearing communities whose actions threaten oil production, beginning with the Ogonis. This is because "compradors, political elite and state officials rely heavily on the state's oil revenues to ultimately fund and reproduce their societal dominance through highly unproductive contrivances, including spurious and inflated contracts and imports, barefaced looting, that impede both economic growth and political stability" (Kemedi, 2003:137). As such, the state's oil policies and politics are underpinned by the economic and 'primordial' interests of the dominant elite forces, which in respect of oil, partly coincide with the corporate interests of the Multinational Oil Companies (Omeje, 2004).

Paradoxically, the violent suppression of Ogoni land, which the state had hoped would cow down the restive region and keep oil flowing, unleashed a rash of further conflicts involving the state, oil companies, and all ethnic communities across the Niger Delta. Thus, between 1996 and 1998, when military dictator Sanni Abacha was in power, crude oil production was virtually paralysed in the region as angry youths seized and occupied oil wells, terminals and flow stations belonging to oil

companies. Assailed by their angry hosts, *petrobusiness* (this refers to all aspects of the petroleum industry e.g., oil refineries, oil services), began to withdraw from the region. Alarmed by the perils of empty treasury, the state responded by unleashing more violence on the local communities. This pattern has remained and indeed has become even more vicious since 1999. In turn, the Niger Delta people have clearly become more

Combative; manifested by the proliferation of armed militia groups intent on defending the regions interests. These include, the Niger Delta Volunteer Force (NDVF), Pan Niger Delta Revolutionary Militia (PNDRM), Ijaw Youth Council (IYC), Federated Niger Delta Ijaw Communities (FNDIC), Movement for the Survival of Ijaw Ethnic Nationality (MOSIEN) and Niger Delta Oil Producing Communities (NDOPC) (Ikelegbe, 2001; AP, 2003). Others include, Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), Egbesu Boys and Chikoko Movement. This has been followed by escalation of blow up of pipelines, oil facilities, seizure of flow stations, hostages taking either for ransom or for use as body shield and fierce confrontations between Nigerian security forces and militant youths in the region - the result of an increasing repression in the region feeding an unending cycle of insecurity and instability (Emuedo *et al*, 2007). For instance, in Ogoni land alone, Shell has been losing about 8,000 barrels of crude oil per day since 1993 (Ukeje, 2001) while sabotage increased from 7 in 1993, 33 in 1996, 57 in 1998, 497 in 1999 and over 600 in 2000 (Okecha, 2003:9). As Ibeanu, (2000), opines, the result has been "less oil, more blood and more fire". The conflicts in the region thus, amply reveal the inherent weakness and the failure of institutions of state to effectively resolve social conflicts. Therefore, it is generally agreed that Nigeria and its oil enclave is at a crucial stage, so critical a stage in the sense that while few people believe that the oil enclave cannot be worse than what it is, the views of the majority is that it could indeed, be worse. There are really no indications that the crisis, which the Nigerian oil enclave has been faced with over four decades is being meaningfully redressed.

### **The Nigerian State and Repression**

Classical political theory defines the state in terms of territoriality, sovereignty, institutions of rule, nationality and law (Young and Turner, 1985). However, contemporary schools view the state in terms of the forces and interests it is presumed to serve, and the prime determinants of state behaviour can be summarised as hegemony, security, autonomy, legitimation and revenue. Though, these different imperatives often push the state in contradictory directions, they help to clarify the patterns of state conduct over time (Young, 1986). The basic structure of the colonial state was determined by its focus of establishing authority and control required for facilitating its primary objective of total economic exploitation, as ample arsenal of arbitrary ordinances empowered state agents to dominate and extract. Lacking political accountability, the colonial state established order and control by recruiting and enlisting a small network of collaborating indigenous intermediaries, whose roles were to "oil" the process of exploitation. Deeply embedded in the autocratic legacy of the colonial system was a concept of the state as the institutionalisation of an alien command, reflected in its laws and mentality (Young, 1986).

The defining characteristics and dominant nature of the Nigerian state could be extrapolated with relative ease from the dynamics of its contemporary political history by recourse to the colonial state. As Peter Ekeh asserts, "modern African politics are in large measures a product of the colonial experience, it is to the colonial experience that any valid conceptualisation of the unique nature of African (and indeed Nigerian) politics must look"<sup>1</sup> (Ekeh, 1976:4). A dominant feature of the post-colonial state is the structural coexistence of and friction between the 'traditional' and the 'modern' in all facets of the society, which is the result of the emergence of a unique historical structural dualism; the existence of two publics instead of one (Ekeh, 1976). This connotes the fact that inherited colonial contradictions between the primordial and civic (traditional and modern) political systems are far from settled and that directed largely by indigenous actors, the post-colonial states are starkly confronted with new dialectics in the context of both 'old' (metropolitan forces) and 'new' (post-colonial elites) interests. Besides portraying the extremely unfinished nature of state making, it compounds the institutional and instrumental constraints of the central authorities in unifying the disparate ethnic nationalities into a 'modern' nation-state. Therefore, independence became merely a cosmetic change in the control of apparatus of state. Thus, "Although political independence brought some change to the composition of the state managers, the character of the state remained much as it was in the colonial era political intensity was reinforced by the disposition to use state power for accumulation" (Ekpo and Omoweh, 2001:106). On post-colonial African politics Mamdani has also noted that colonial rule and decentralised despotism were synonymous (Mamdani, 2000), In Nigeria, what was true under colonialism became more so in the post-colonial oil era. Therefore, sectional feelings have dominated contemporary politics especially in the distribution of resources. State offices are regarded as prebends that can be appropriated by officeholders, who use them to generate material benefits for themselves and their ethnic groups and the statutory purposes of such offices became a matter of secondary concern (Joseph 1986).

### **The State, "Oilification" and Conflict Resolution**

The current intensity, viciousness and the destructive nature that the Niger Delta conflict has assumed has, so it appears, made the issue of conflict management and resolution to be of utmost concern to the government, the civil society and the international community. According to a report by Shell,

annual casualties from fighting in the Niger Delta (over 1,000 fatalities a year) place the region in the 'high intensity conflict' category, alongside well-known cases such as Colombia and Chechnya. The criminalisation and political economy of conflicts in the region mean that the basis for escalated, protracted and entrenched violence is rapidly being established. This obviously not only threatens the future ability of Shell Companies in Nigeria to operate but also Nigerian national security" (SPDC, 2003). However, what is most confounding about the state's conflict management strategies is the tendency to twist and treat every conflict in the Niger Delta, including some episodic 'epi-oil' conflicts, which have actually been abetted or orchestrated by the state itself, as oil conflicts. The present civilian administration in contrast to other regimes before it, has probably contributed most to the fast tracking of this phenomenon (we shall come back to this point later). "Oilification", is therefore, yet, another in the series of dangerous contradictions engendered by the political faction of dominant majority elite under the guise of national interest to suppress, pacify, subjugate and dominate the ethnic minorities of the Niger Delta.

Hence, rather than manage conflicts in the Niger Delta, the dominant majority elite who personify the--state^ue4 eofrflct in4he Niger-DgHa-through-^oilification<sup>1</sup>. Oilification is the process of distorting and reconstructing an extra-oil (non-direct oil) conflict to give it an oil import in order to justify the State's security action; including a ruthless military campaign (Omeje, 2004) and we may also add extra judicial killings in the Niger Delta. No doubt, oil extraction and distribution, as well as oil revenue politics, inform most contemporary conflicts in the Niger Delta but these by no means occlude the existence of some non-oil conflict in the region. In fact, contrary to popular perception, not all conflicts in the Niger Delta have their origins directly in oil. Oilification is therefore, a political practice that directly or indirectly hides under the ambiguous cliché of sovereign national interest to, at various times, reinvent and promote the crudest forms of elitist and ethnic or primordial interests. By corollary, it is the state or its accredited agents/agencies that most inexorably (but not exclusively) oilify. Oilification thrives on mischief and cant, spin and deceit and the national interest subsumed therein, is nothing but oil. Though a phenomenon logically associated with non-direct oil conflicts, there is a limited sense in which some State officials have applied Oilification to direct oil conflicts and this in turn plays a key part in the rationalisation of the excesses in the use of State power. Therefore, in the prosecution of oil conflicts, by successive governments, the state and its agents have often used oilification, to rationalise a number of atrocities, including extra-judicial killing, torture, arrest and prolonged detention of innocent citizens and adversaries. For instance, a large number of the extra-judicial atrocities perpetrated in the 1990s by the defunct Rivers State Special Task Force on Internal Security against many law abiding persons and groups throughout the State, who were ostensibly unconnected with the anti-oil campaign, were expediently rationalised via oilification (NDT, 2001). The present 'democratic' regime has accorded oilification a much more decisive twist. Meier opines that, civil unrest has resulted in over 5000 deaths since the transition to democracy, and has resulted in the closures of terminals and flow stations. He stated further "Violence in the Niger River Delta, home to a majority of Nigeria's oil reserves, kills about 1,000 people a year, on par with conflicts in Chechnya and Colombia" (Meier 2004:2)

Over the years, special military task forces; "Operation Andoni", "Operation HAKURI", "Operation Restore Hope" and "Operation Flush" have been created and used, in different parts of Rivers, Delta and Bayelsa States (the beds of youth restiveness) to torture and persecute people of these areas, in the name of resolving real and imagined oil conflicts. Also, joint military task forces *Sytvanus I. Ebohon and Crosdel O. Emuedo*

such as "Operation Fire for Fire" "Rapid Response Squad" and "SARS" established for fighting civil crimes, have hardly made any distinction between civil crimes in the Niger Delta and so-called oil sabotage offences. Due to its obsession with oil, conflicts that have no apparent oil connections, such as the gerrymandering that complicated the Warri crisis, the military invasion of Odi and Odioma are reconstructed to draw an oil connection, to create the necessary justification for military actions or reprisals.

The unwritten yet boldly etched dictum in the mindsets of the political elite across the major federating ethnic units has been that whoever controls the Niger Delta controls the proverbial honey pot of the Nigerian State with all its sybaritic trappings and indulgences. The brutality, which has been inflicted, on Ogoni and the Niger Delta people in general by successive governments is a clear signifier of the extent the major ethnic elite are willing and able to go in order to impose a tenuous and delicate form of order and stability that can ensure the continuation of oil extraction from the region (Naanen, 1995; Osaghae, 1995). Thus, the character and behaviour of the Nigerian state, as well as nature of the politics that it spawned have been frequently identified as factors in identity mobilisation and conflict (Esman, 1994; Osaghae, 1994; Egwu, 2001). Oilification has permeated the psyche of all Nigerians as any occurrence in the Niger Delta is instantly associated with oil, such that an occurrence that may pass unnoticed in other parts of the Country; is in the Niger Delta instantly assumed to be oil related, and turned into an issue of national security. For instance, when on New Year's Eve 2004, Nigeria's Taleban Sect in Kannama town, Borno state destroyed

government offices, attacked police stations, killed policemen, and abducted 30 men (*BBC, 2004*), security forces were not sent in to annihilate the town. The reaction of government would have been predictable had it occurred in the Niger Delta. As a result, any arm of the Nigerian security forces on a mission to the oil rich region exhibits character traits of force of occupation; to subdue and subjugate the region for continued oil supplies. This explains the constant recourse to excessive use of force by the security agencies even on peaceful protesters but which they hardly ever use in other parts of the country. This has hardened both the people's resistance and their resolve to inflict as much injury as possible on them. In turn, security agents became targets of reprisals by militant youths in the region. As manifested in Ikpako village, Ovia Northeast LGA of Edo State, where restive youths shot and wounded four policemen (*The Guardian, 1998*) and in Ugbo town, in Ilaje LGA of Ondo State where decomposing bodies of five policemen, were recovered three weeks after they had allegedly been killed (*The Punch, 1998*).

Oil is no doubt, highly strategic to Nigeria's security. Furthermore, oil resources are highly important for the reinvention of the state, as well as for the reproduction of its dominant elite forces. Thus, from the state's point of view, any threat to oil activity warrants decisive action that the international society would understandably condone. Therefore, oilifying a non-direct oil conflict in the Niger Delta certainly does pay off as a convenient means of "securitisation" (see Waever, 1995; Knudsen 2001) and often, this is in the personal enrichment of state officials. Presented below, are some practical illustrations of the burgeoning oilification of conflicts by the state, manifested by its response to attempts by communities to protect their rights and details of the Odi massacre.

In 1990, the people of Umuechem were engaged in a peaceful protest at the gates of the Shell's flow station located in their community when the community was visited by contingents of Nigerian police. They came on the invitation of Shell, with the backing of Aso Rock, Abuja. Eighty members of the community were murdered in the unprovoked attack. And houses in the community were either burnt down or looted. The people of the minority Ogoni ethnic nationality of the Niger Delta commenced peaceful protests against the destruction of their natural environment and means of livelihood in 1993. These protests, were solely based on passive resistance and Ken Saro-Wiwa's articulate discuss of the Ogoni problem at various international fora. In November 10, 1995, the military junta of General Sani Abacha murdered Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight other Ogoni leaders after a kangaroo tribunal that was set up by a northern attorney general, chaired by a northern judge, under a northern chief justice and reporting to a northern head of state, convicted them on trumped up charges for murder. Though the world was outraged, Shell was found complicit in the whole affair. For the people of Ilaje community, Ondo State of Nigeria, May 28, 1998 is a day they cannot forget in a hurry. Ilaje youths had occupied Chevron's oil platform in order to induce Chevron to have a dialogue with them. Again on invitation of the Oil Company and full knowledge of the Nigerian state, a combined force of the army and police swooped down in helicopters on the protesting youths. Reports on the incident revealed that the combined force landed shooting, Rambo style, killing two youths on the spot (*ERA, 1999*).

On November 20, 1999, barely six months into Nigeria's current nascent democracy and four years after Ken Saro-Wiwa and his eight Ogoni compatriots were judiciously murdered, President Obasanjo ordered soldiers into Odi, town in the Niger Delta. The soldiers left behind, complete destruction of Odi as the only house left standing, was the local branch of First Bank while 2,483 people were slain. The overwhelming majority of the dead were women, children and the aged and infirm. A Joint Task Force of the Nigerian Army and Navy in the same manner massacred about 50 Odioma community members in Bayelsa State on February 19, 2005 during a military raid. The whole community was also destroyed with houses bombed and burnt in a manner reminiscent of the Odi Massacre of 1999. Again, those killed were mostly women, children and the elderly. Odioma, one of the many oil-bearing communities in the Niger Delta, had been in conflict with neighbouring Bassambri community over the ownership of a fishing settlement, Obiaku, where Shell has some oil wells and had mobilised a contractor to construct an oil flow station. Odioma youths protesting lack of Environmental Impact Assessment stopped work on the project. Also, on February 21, 2006 a detachment of the Nigerian military using helicopter gun-ships aerially bombarded Okerenkoko, Ukpogbene, Seitorububor, Seigbene and Perezouweikoregbene, communities, in Gbaramatu Kingdom killing 15 innocent women and children (*Amaize and Bebenimibo, 2006*). This according to the state was ostensibly to sink barges used for illegal bunkering.

### **Aftermath of Oilification**

In response to the military repressions by the state, Ijaw youths have intensified attacks against Chevron, Shell and other major oil companies' operations in the Niger Delta. As some authors have asserted, the proliferation of clandestine militant groups and their activities in the Ijaw-dominated parts of Niger Delta culminating in the exacerbation of Ijaw resistance against oil production activities and the state are in part linked to the people's collective malcontent over the Odi massacre and other episodic crises in the region (*Ikelegbe, 2001; Eke, 2003*).

The direct impact of all these on the security of the local people and their environment on the one

hand, as well as on the fortunes of the state-oil companies alliance on the other hand, have been enormous. Thousands of people have been reportedly killed in the cycle of ethnic wars between ethnic groups on one hand and the state security forces and the people on the other in the oil rich region. In its tedious desire to pacify the region to ensure maximum oil supplies, the state incessantly scapegoat and demonise the people in its warped intervention. At the same time, oil installations and facilities of oil companies especially Shell, Chevron and lately Agip in the region have been targeted. Oil spillage and environmental pollution have increased--remarkably--due possibly to ramifications of subversive protests, including pipeline sabotage and militant activities, which have often resulted in the closure of flow stations. The resultant state of insecurity and the siege mentality, which this has engendered, has taken a toll on the psyche of management of many multinational companies that they have decided to close shop.

Since 2003, over 80 per cent of companies and business concerns, most of them petroleum affiliated, have relocated from Warri on account of the unending communal crisis (*Vanguard*, 2003b). While many of the oil servicing companies have relocated to Port Harcourt in the Southeast of the Niger Delta, most staff of the few remaining oil companies in Warri now reside in Benin City, in the neighbouring Edo State. By 2006, however, there was no other place to locate to in the region but outside it. Wilbros, an American Oil Servicing firm in Port Harcourt has announced its withdrawal from Nigeria in the face of the unabated kidnapping, killings, insecurity and gratuitous disruption of oil operations by militants in the Niger Delta and over 4,000 workers of the company will soon hit the already crowded labour market (Arubi, 2006). In terms of revenue, the effects are not any less severe. The country has been unable to meet its projected revenue projections due to serious short falls in her foreign exchange receipts, as such, it has been unable to fully implement its budgets for the past four years. In June 2003, Chevron's Health, Environment and Safety Manager, Ray Keel, announced that the company was losing 130,000 barrels of crude oil per day (amounting to about \$3.4 million daily loss to the joint venture) due to the continued disturbances and youth violence in Delta State, which had necessitated the closure of all of its swamp flow stations (*This Day*, 2003). Also, Mr. Daukoru, OPEC President and Nigeria's Petroleum Resources Minister, averred in a speech that due to continued disturbances, "the country's production capacity has remained diminished by 600,000 barrels a day. In financial terms, at an average price of \$60 a barrel that amounts to \$36 million daily in lost revenue or \$12 billion over a seven-month period" (Peterside, 2006:3). The result is that the oil-bearing communities are being incessantly portrayed as greedy and unpatriotic, in government and *petrobusiness* circles (Onitsha, 1999).

In an explicit oilification theory, President Obasanjo declared the militant youths who have been critically pushed to fight for survival of the environment for the next generations due to unmitigated disaster by oil companies, common criminals whose sole intent was to disrupt oil supplies by wrecking havoc on oil installations and facilities. He consequently gave a 'shoot at sight order' to the special combined security task force in the area "Operation Restore Hope". The effectiveness of the order and other draconian measures put in place to pacify the region can be adduced by news reports that emanated from the region thereafter, (see Okpongete, 2006; Adebayo, 2006; Igbikiowobu & Ahiuma-Young 2006; Etim, 2006; Osagie, 2006; Ebiri & Onuorah 2006; Naku, 2006). The ineffectiveness of government orders and draconian measures applied in the Niger Delta was clearly manifested by a three-day warning strike embarked upon by the Petroleum and the Natural Gas Senior Staff Association of Nigeria (PENGASSAN), and National Union of Petroleum and Natural Gas Workers (NUPENG). The reason for the strike, according to the oil workers was to pressure government to deal more effectively with the deplorable security situation in the Niger Delta, citing the case of Nelson Ujeya, a Community Liaison Officer of Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC), killed by soldiers of the task force deployed by government to pacify the region. As has been aptly noted, the conflict in the Niger Delta has today emerged as the most deadly threat to statehood, political order, national security, democratic durability and peace in Africa and elsewhere (Ikelegbe, 2006:1).

### **Kaiama: The Wind Before the Storm**

The visibility and sophistication of the Ogoni struggle under MASOP in the early 1990s and the level of state repression, brought vividly to all Niger Delta oil bearing communities the need to take their destinies in their own hands by following their example. On August 16, 1997, a Pan-Niger Delta group; the Chikoko Movement with participants drawn from different communities across the Niger Delta, human and environmental rights organisations, women's and youth movement was launched at Eleibiri in Bayelsa State. (The organisers, deliberately opted for Eleibiri due to the expected negative publicity against Shell following its failure to clean up the environment, arising from a spillage that occurred earlier in March 1997). Its mandate was to enforce the right of the people of the Niger delta to an environmental and ecological order conducive to their survival. The launch of Chikoko Movement clearly signalled that if myriad complaints in the region were not addressed, oil-bearing communities were galvanised to a higher

level of trans-ethnic political mobilisation. The activities of this pan-Ijaw ethnic alliance gave rise to the Kaiama Declaration.

On December 11, 1998 an estimated 5000 ethnic Ijaw youths at a conference in Kaiama, Bayelsa State set a two-week deadline for all multinational oil companies to cease operations and vacate Ijaw land and territorial waters - and indeed the entire Niger Delta. The date for the expiration of the deadline was December 30 1998. This is what is now popularly known as the Kaiama Declaration along the line of the Ogoni Bill of rights. The Kaiama Declaration set out four strategies to harmonise the disparate positions of micro-Ijaw oil communities in their relations with oil companies and the Nigerian State. First was "*operation climate change*", this entailed shutting down oil installations and extinguishing gas flares. Second was "*operation lunch*", this enjoined Ijaw youths to embark on symbolic gestures, including clanging plates with spoons, to remind the government that they were hungry and had decided to take their destiny into their hands. Third was "*operation reach out*", this involves reconciliation between Ijaw and all their warring neighbours, such as Itsekiris and Ilajes, and to request them to join in the shutting down of oil installations. The fourth was "*operation warfare*", this entailed an all-out counter-reprisal by youths in the event of military reprisals. This action climaxed persistent calls on the oil companies for the payment of compensation to prevent the collapse of the local social infrastructure, arising from their degradation of the environment. They also raised political issues about the current revenue allocation formula and the decentralisation and devolution of power to local communities, called for the overhaul of federal structure, which is skewed against the Niger delta minority oil-bearing communities. Lastly, the youths denounced the State sponsored repression that has turned the oil communities into garrison enclave. When the deadline expired on the said date, the youths nicknamed "Egbesu Boys" embarked on a march unarmed to Government House in Yenegoa, the Bayelsa State capital singing traditional Ijaw war songs (Basse, 1999:26-28). However, in a pre-emptive strike, armed soldiers on sentry duties at the Governor's lodge shot and killed or wounded several protesters. According to reports by *Tell*, Magazine, the youths dispersed but reconvene in the evening and this time, systematically raided military checkpoints and police stations, seizing weapons and ammunitions. The conflict soon spread like wild fire as youths from Odi, town close to Kaiama, ransacked the police station for arms and proceeded to Yenegoa to join the Egbesu Boys. At the Mbiama junction, on the north-east highway, the youths attacked and overpowered a joint army/mobile police checkpoint, while an advance party of 25 battle geared soldiers, deployed to prevent the attack by the youths were also ambushed, disarmed and taken prisoners. Then at about 10 kilometres to the State capital Yenegoa, nearly 700 youths engaged another military detachment and this time they incurred losses. However, while on pursuit, the soldiers met reinforcements of Egbesu boys and both sides suffered very severe casualties (Niboro, 1999:20-25).

According to several authors, in the early 1990s, arising from government repression the National Youth Council of Ogoni People (NYCOP), the youth wing of the Movement for the Survival of-Ogoni People -fMOSGP), popularised—grassroots confrontation of this mould (Welch, 1995a; 1995b; UNPO, 1996; Obi, 1997). Other oil-bearing communities in the Niger delta soon adapted the strategy and it became the norm in the region. The result was that erstwhile less hostile oil-bearing communities became manifestly more belligerent towards the oil companies and the State. For example, on January 20 1998, Eket in Akwa-Ibom State became the theatre of a major youth protest by a pan-Eket group *Afigh waad Ekid*, or the Supreme Council of Eket Youths - the first protest since thirty years of Mobil's presence in the town. Among other issues, the youths demanded the relocation of Mobile's headquarters from Lagos to Eket, appointment of a minimum of three Eket citizens as director and Mobile's allocation of three days production every month to local community environmental development concerns. Soon after this, Isoko youths under the aegis of the Isoko National Youth Movement seized five flow stations in Isoko North and Isoko South Local Government Areas, sacked the workers and paralysed oil activities and in mid July 1999, 64 Shell workers, including seven expatriates, were held hostage in two oil communities; Ozoro and Ovrode by militant youths from Isoko land. The youths allegedly geared for battle, reportedly seized Shell SPDC Drilling-rig-1A, blocked all access roads and shut down all electricity generating sets. They also impounded some buses and outboard engines belonging to Daewoo Nigeria Limited, a contractor to Shell. The demands of the youths among others include; payment of N50 billion compensation to the Isoko people for over three decades of oil exploration, creation of an additional two Local Government Councils for the area, appointment of an Isoko representative on the Board of OMPADEC and the immediate employment of all the employable Isoko youths by Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC). Not to be out done in this expression of collective anger and frustration, irate Itsekiri youths in army uniform attacked Oruigbo, an Itsekiri village in Warri South Local Government Area and held about 100 SPDC, Westminster Dredging and Texaco workers hostage for about four hours in late October 1998. Now, incidents such as these have become regular ways of expressing community grievances against state and oil

companies interests in the Niger delta. SPDC alone has 92 producing fields, 86 flow stations, and 6, 2000 kilometres network of pipelines and flow stations.

There are several reasons why youths turn increasingly to violent confrontation to draw the attention of the public their grievances and those of their communities. The earliest community protest involved non-violent methods, such as petitions and the sending of community delegations to present complaints to oil companies and to the State and federal governments. For instance, on December 14, 1994, Nembe youths merely gathered at the town's waterfront to present their demands to the government and oil companies (*The Guardian*, 1994:27). Occasionally, there were also demonstrations, and picketing of oil company locations but these methods yielded no positive results. However, while community expression of legitimate social demands and or grievances often produced no positive response from oil company executives or government officials, they never failed to evoke outright indignation, hostility and sanctions from government. Usually, no discrimination is made between women or men, young or aged, strong or infirm. For instance, on 8 August 2002, at 6.00am, over 3000 mostly aged Isekiri, Ijaw and Urhobo women carried out peaceful protests at the gates of the operational headquarters of both Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC) and Chevron Nigeria Ltd. in Warri (Delta State). In what was obviously a dressed rehearsal, at exactly 6.30 pm a combined force of military and mobile police came from within the premises of both companies to forcibly disperse the women with tear-gas, *kohoko* (whip made from twisted animal hide) and the butt of their guns. No company official had contacted or warned the women before the forced dispersal. Arising from the failure of oil-bearing communities to attract development and mitigation of the environment through peaceful means, the youths then turned to militant actions; seizure of flow stations, rigs, damage to oil installations, pipe lines and some time damage to vehicles and other movable properties of oil companies. The militarisation of the region beginning with the Ogonis provided easy access to sophisticated firearms and ammunition, sold by returnee ECOMOG soldiers, on mission to the region. This enabled militant youths to inflict severe damage on oil interests and easily evade the security services due to their familiarity with the hash Niger Delta terrain.

## Conclusion

The role of environmental factors in shaping global security and international relations has been given more prominence since the fall of the Berlin Wall (Klare and , 1994; Miller 1995). What has been happening in the Niger Delta is that the state, which ideally should mediate the oil conflict, is itself a major prosecutor of the conflict, stoutly championing unconcealed and unpopular interests. The State's primary interests are the economic and material well-being of the dominant local elites -mostly of the majority ethnic groups. Juxtaposed to the latter given the centrality of oil to national revenues are the interests of the multinational oil companies. Increasingly, therefore, the state oilifies conflicts in its bid to justify their securitisation using military action. But oilification has complicated conflicts in the oil region by escalating the battered peoples' hostilities against oil companies operations in their areas. The state's repression and egotism to the desires and demands of the Niger Delta people have made the expectations that the oil communities would gradually de-emphasise their violent protests substantially elusive (Obi, 1997).

This paper does not pretend to exhaust all the reasons for the present vitriolic situation in the Niger Delta. By presenting some of them, we merely seek to question the accepted but erroneous impression by those who want the status quo maintained that the revolts in the Niger Delta are \\-informed and irrelevant episodic expression of blind violence (Momoh, 1996). Disruptive conflicts in and beyond the oil-producing region will unlikely abate without crucial reforms in the structures and policies of the state to downgrade the predatory interests of the dominant elites and in their stead have the popular aspirations of the vast majority of the citizenry, including ethnic minorities, significantly incorporated into the trajectory of governance. Sadly, there are no strong prospects of this happening in the nearest future, as the state's objective is to endlessly maintain the region for revenue purposes. Thus, in the short term, the present cycle of violence, will likely thrive with slim successful remedies, while in the long term, cynicism with the status quo, skewed federalism and democracy, could inevitably make everything possible; from Kaplan's (1994) 'criminal anarchy' on the one hand, and from non-violent permutational devolution to violent factional disintegration on the other hand.

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