

Oiling the Friction: Environmental Conflict Management in the Niger Delta, Nigeria

by Okechukwu Ibeanu

Abstract: The Niger Delta, a sensitive ecosystem rich in biodiversity, has witnessed considerable violence as a result of the tense relationship among oil companies, the Nigerian state, and oil-bearing communities. Environmental damage from the extraction and movement of fossil fuels is a central point of dispute among the parties while the precise extent of ecological damage remains unknown. Drawing on numerous interviews while living and working in the Niger Delta, Dr. Okechukwu Ibeanu analyzes the management of conflicts surrounding petroleum production in the region, including the role of state violence and contradictory perceptions of security held by Delta communities and the oil companies and their partners in the Nigerian federal government.

INTRODUCTION

“OIL, BLOOD, AND FIRE.” This was how an elderly resident of the Ogoni town of Bori described the Niger Delta to me in 1995. It was at the height of the violent conflicts between Shell (Shell Petroleum Development Company, an affiliate of the Royal Dutch/Shell Group), backed by Nigeria’s military rulers at the time, and the Ogoni, an ethnic minority in the oil-rich Niger Delta. The violence culminated in the execution of nine Ogoni rights activists by the military dictatorship of General Sani Abacha after a mock trial. Paradoxically, the violent suppression of the Ogoni, which the military had hoped would cow the restive region and keep the oil wells flowing, unleashed a rash of further conflicts involving the state, oil companies, and ethnic communities across the Niger Delta. Consequently, between 1996 and 1998, when the dictator Abacha died, crude oil production, the mainstay of the Nigerian economy, was paralyzed. Angry youths seized oil wells, terminals, and flow stations belonging to companies like Shell, Chevron, and Mobil, and took numerous hostages for ransom. Assailed by their angry hosts, *petrobusiness*¹ began to withdraw from the Delta. Alarmed by the prospects of empty coffers to fund its unbridled corruption, the dictatorship responded by unleashing even more violence on the local communities. The result was LESS OIL, MORE BLOOD, AND MORE FIRE.

The violence of the last ten years in the Niger Delta has brought relations among oil companies, the Nigerian state, and oil-bearing communities full-circle. For four decades, ecological devastation on the one hand, and neglect arising from crude oil production, on the other hand, have left much of the Niger Delta desolate, uninhabitable, and poor. The shady *modus operandi* of oil companies and the incompetence and corruption of state officials, ensured that neither took responsibility for the enormous environmental and social damages caused by crude oil production. Frustrated, the people of the Niger Delta took up arms against *petrobusiness* and its political allies. The failure of a violent final solution to the community resistance, a tactic favored by successive military dictatorships, inevitably led to calls for a reassessment of the petroleum industry in Nigeria, and particularly the need for a new conflict management regime in Nigeria’s oil belt. Presently, these calls are even more pronounced since the inauguration of an elected government in May 1999 appears not to have assuaged the people’s needs of the Niger Delta. As late as November 1999, there were very violent clashes between youths and security forces in the communities of Choba in Rivers State and Odi in Bayelsa State. In the case of the Odi, the new civilian administration surprisingly called in the army, which sacked the entire community, killed over 100 inhabitants, and destroyed property running

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into billions of Nigerian Naira (100 Naira = US\$1).

This article analyzes the management of conflicts surrounding petroleum production in the Niger Delta. It sets out the dynamic of environmental conflict in the region and explores how two different political regimes, one authoritarian and the other democratic, have approached conflict management in the area.

THE NIGER DELTA ENVIRONMENT

The Niger Delta is said to be the world's largest wetland. This 36,000 square kilometers (14,000 square miles) of marshland, creeks, tributaries, and lagoons drain the Niger River into the Atlantic at the Bight of Biafra. A third of this area, about 12,000 square kilometers, is fragile mangrove forest, probably the largest mangrove forest in the world. The biodiversity of the

Niger Delta is very high. The area contains diverse plant and animal species, including many exotic and unique flowers and birds. Implied in this ecology is that the Niger Delta is an easily disequibrated environment. There is also a serious scarcity of arable land and freshwater. Additionally, transportation through this ecosystem, which is usually via rivers and creeks that snake through dense, mosquito-infested swamps, is very difficult. There is a high incidence of malaria and other water borne diseases in the area. Indeed, early European visitors to the area described it as the "white man's graveyard" because of the high mortality rate they experienced. In short, the Niger Delta is a very sensitive ecosystem.

Not anymore, however. The white man's graveyard has become the white man's gold mine with the discovery of black gold. The introduction of petroleum exploration and drilling in this very fragile environment, however, has had a devastating effect on the environ-

Figure 1. Map of West Africa



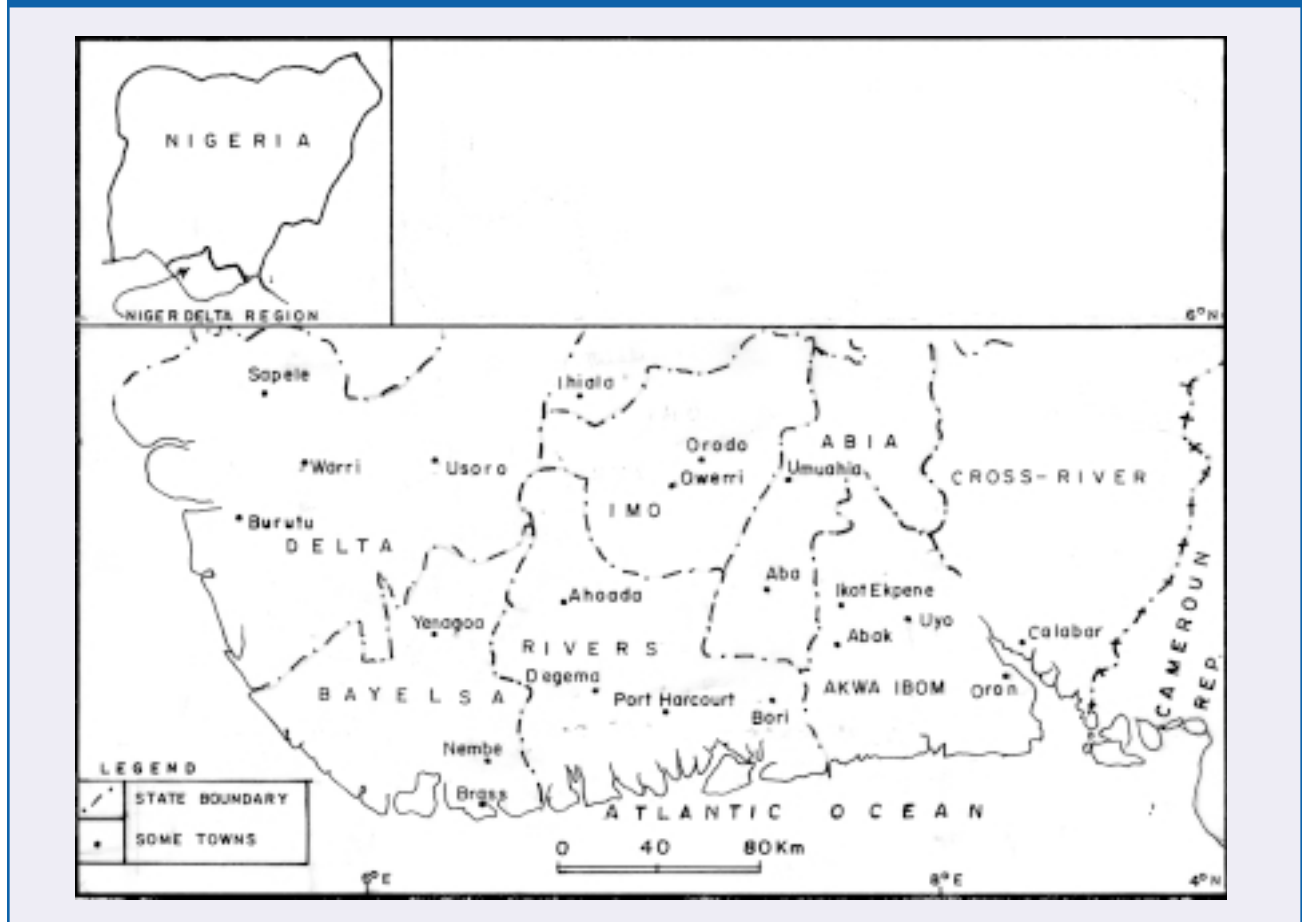
ment. In the fifty years of crude oil production, the graveyard is itself close to dying, while *petrobusiness* and corrupt state officials continue to profit enormously.

Petroleum exploration in Nigeria dates back to the first few years of this century. Organized marketing and distribution started around 1907 by a German Company, Nigerian Bitumen Corporation. In 1956, the Anglo-Dutch group Shell D'Archy discovered oil in commercial quantities at Oloibiri, a town in the Niger Delta. By February 1958, Nigeria became an oil exporter with a production level of 6,000 barrels per day. Other multinational oil companies like Mobil, Elf Aquitaine, Chevron, and Agip have since joined Shell. Nigeria is the fifth largest producer of crude oil in the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). At peak production in the 1970s, Nigeria's export was two million barrels of crude oil per day. Presently, exports stand at about one million barrels daily, mostly to the United States. Nigeria's oil, the so-called *Bonny Light*, is said to be environmentally friendly because of its low sulfur content.

Today, crude oil is produced in nine states in Nige-

ria, namely, Rivers, Bayelsa, Delta, Edo, Imo, Abia, Akwa-Ibom, Cross-River, and Ondo. Although it contributes only thirteen percent of Nigeria's gross domestic product, petroleum provides over eighty percent of government revenues annually. This makes oil production very central to the survival of state officials as most public works contracts and the continued functioning of government agencies depend on it. By law, the Nigerian state owns all mineral deposits in Nigeria, including crude oil. The central government controls revenues from crude oil and sets up a formula for distributing them to the other tiers of government. Shell remains the largest producer in Nigeria, controlling about fifty percent of total production. In 1995, the company reported that in all, it had ninety-four oil fields scattered across an area of 31,000 square kilometers in the Niger Delta, from which nearly one million barrels of oil were produced daily.² Inevitably, this position has brought Shell very close to the ruling governments in Nigeria. In fact, for many communities in the Niger Delta, there is little difference between the oil companies, especially Shell, and the Nigerian state. This assumption is not entirely

Figure 2. Map of Niger Delta Region, Nigeria



without justification. For instance, on countless occasions, oil companies have called out directly the police, the army, and the navy to quell disturbances on their installations, without applying to the government for help.

Apart from crude oil production, there are many other upstream and downstream activities of the petroleum industry in Nigeria including refineries, oil services, liquefied petroleum gas, and liquefied natural gas production and marketing. Export of liquefied natural gas began in late 1999 following the completion of the multi-billion dollar liquefied natural gas project in Bonny, said to be the largest in the developing world. Nigeria is said to have natural gas reserves of 100 trillion standard cubic feet (about 2.8317 trillion standard cubic meters) in the region.

Prior to the Bonny project, the practice of oil companies was to flare the gas. Enormous amounts of natural gas were flared annually, usually in the vicinity of human dwellings. In 1982, Shell, Gulf, Mobil, Agip, Texaco, Pan Ocean, Ashland, Phillips, Tenneco, and Elf flared over thirteen billion cubic meters of gas in 145 communities in Nigeria (Table 1). Shell, the worst culprit, flared nearly seven billion cubic meters of gas in that year alone. In one case, in the town of Sapele, Shell burnt over 944 million cubic meters of gas. In 1991, Nigeria exceeded the world average for natural gas flaring by seventy-two percent. In that year, while the world average for gas flared as a percentage of total production was four percent, Nigeria flared seventy-six percent of that total production (Table 2). Apart from the huge quantities of greenhouse gases that gas-flaring pumps

Table 1. Gas flaring in Nigeria by company, 1982-83

Company	1982		
	Gas Produced (billion m ³)	Gas Flared (billion m ³)	Percent Flared
Shell	7,367,789,877	6,932,385,329	94.09
Gulf	2,120,140,478	2,096,585,478	98.88
Mobil	983,743,700	673,759,700	68.49
Agip	2,699,179,721	2,382,145,001	88.25
Texaco	375,931,000	368,279,000	97.96
Pan Ocean	85,815,232	79,787,789	92.98
Ashland	224,416,103	223,232,456	99.47
Phillips	28,885,150	28,434,153	98.44
Tenneco	26,263,565	26,175,613	99.66
Elf	559,405,267	550,999,332	98.50
Total	14,471,570,093	13,361,783,851	92.33
Company	1983		
	Gas Produced (billion m ³)	Gas Flared (billion m ³)	Percent Flared
Shell	8,148,964,094	5,413,250,218	66.43
Gulf	1,824,902,000	180,0971,000	98.69
Mobil	1,272,157,000	900,286,000	70.77
Agip	2,192,274,700	2,102,150,861	95.89
Texaco	436,157,000	430,988,000	98.81
Pan Ocean	128,410,203	122,307,350	95.25
Ashland	435,503,850	430,560,153	98.86
Phillips	26,217,125	25,779,720	98.33
Tenneco	3,1145,189	31,145,189	100.00
Elf	696,543,040	690,734,090	99.16
Total	15,192,274,201	10,618,229,855	69.89

Source: Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation, *Annual Reports*.

into the atmosphere, constant flares affect both wildlife and human beings negatively. At temperatures of up to 1,400°C, the “sauna bath” effects that gas flares produce make living in many communities nearly impossible.

The Niger Delta environment is being destroyed in many ways. High-pressure pipelines criss-cross villages carrying crude oil, premium motor spirits, diesel, and gas. Spills and leaks from these pipelines and other installations destroy wildlife, farmlands, forests, aquifers, and human lives. Within the last year, separate fires in the Jesse and Ngwa areas in the states of Delta and Abia respectively, claimed hundreds of lives. Often, oil companies and the government claim that spillage is the result of sabotage by local communities for purposes of illegally obtaining petroleum products and monetary compensation. Note that Nigerian laws forbid the payment of compensation in spills involving sabotage. However, many of the pipelines and valves in question are very old and therefore prone to failure.

Additionally, the discharge of refinery effluents into freshwater sources and farmland devastates the environment and threatens human lives. Such effluents contain excessive amounts of very toxic materials like mercury and chromium. For instance, fish store mercury in their brains for a long time, which can then easily pass into the human food chain with adverse affects on human populations. Recent studies of some communities in the Niger Delta by the environmental group Environmental Rights Action (ERA) showed that most of the underground aquifers are heavily contaminated with a

cocktail of dangerous metals and chemicals.

Finally, badly constructed canals and causeways built to facilitate activities of oil companies have devastated the hydrology of the region, causing flooding in some areas and water deficiency in others. Large forests have atrophied as a result. Most of these artificial canals also let saline waters of the Atlantic into freshwater sources thereby increasing the scarcity of drinking water and killing many species of plants, animals, and fish. In some cases, the entire vegetation is precipitously altered as freshwater is destroyed by oil company canals and causeways. For instance, water hyacinths³ have become very common in many areas where they were previously unknown. Although oil companies and successive governments in Nigeria would want to paint a contrary picture, the devastation that petroleum production has inflicted on the environment is a central factor in understanding the conflict dynamic in the Niger Delta.

UNDERSTANDING THE CONFLICT DYNAMIC IN THE NIGER DELTA

The Niger Delta contains most of Nigeria’s hydrocarbon deposits. By implication, the Delta holds the bulk of the economic resources that sustains the public treasury in Nigeria. Yet, years of neglect and ecological devastation have left much of the Niger Delta despoiled and impoverished. This contradiction of riches is a constant refrain in most conflicts in the Delta.

A myriad of specific factors is often adduced for the protracted conflict in the Niger Delta. Among them are neglect by government and oil companies, unemployment, military rule, the minority question, and a badly structured Nigerian federalism, especially as it concerns finances. While these factors singly or jointly bear on the conflict dynamic in the region, what has been lacking is their integration into an explanatory system to enable us to make sense of empirical data and support effective policy intervention. Thus, it is not often clear if all the factors are causal or only mediatory. If they are all causal factors, are they principal, secondary, or tertiary? It is also not clear if the factors are trigger, pivotal, mobilizing, or aggravating.⁴

Perhaps, the most commonly cited reason for conflict in the Niger Delta is the dissatisfaction of oil-bearing communities with monetary compensation paid by oil companies and government for exploitation rights and ecological damage. The oil-bearing communities are then portrayed as greedy and unpatriotic. This explanation is popular in government and *petrobusiness* circles.⁵ Surely, this explanation is simplistic and reductionist for

Table 2. Natural Gas Flared as Percentage of Gross Production (1991)

Country	Percent of Gas Flared
U.S.A	0.6
Holland	0.0
Britain	4.3
Ex-USSR	1.5
Mexico	5.0
OPEC COUNTRIES	
Nigeria	76.0
Libya	21.0
Saudi Arabia	20.0
Iran	19.0
Algeria	4.0
OPEC TOTAL	18.0
WORLD TOTAL	4.0

Source: Friends of the Earth, Nigeria, 2000.

it explains everything in terms of money. Without doubt, compensation is important in understanding what is happening in Nigeria's oil belt, but it conceals more than it reveals. For instance, it disguises the fact that in some cases it is the type of compensation that is contested, and in others it is the procedure for arriving at the compensation that is at issue. Still in other cases, what creates discord is the skewed distribution of compensation. Most importantly, in many cases of conflict, monetary compensation is not the issue at all. Local people are simply asking to have their farmlands back in order to repossess control of their lives and environment. Moreover, the monetary explanation is unacceptable for it simply blames the victims: it is the villagers' excessive monetary demands that generate crisis.

A Contradiction of Securities

Contrary to conventional wisdom and prevalent explanations of the conflict in the Niger Delta, disagreements with state officials and *petrobusiness* over monetary compensation do not necessarily propel local communities into a conflict trajectory. Rather, conflicts arise out of a *contradiction of securities*, which the Nigerian state because of its character is unable to manage and reconcile. This contradiction of securities hinges on the opposition between perceptions and conditions of security advanced by local communities and those advanced by state officials and *petrobusiness*. Put simply, security for local communities means recognition that mindless exploitation of crude oil and the resultant ecological damage threaten resource flows and livelihoods. For state officials and *petrobusiness*, security consists of an unencumbered production of crude oil at competitive (read cheap) costs.

Conceptually, security has two related meanings.⁶ First, it has a strictly political meaning that refers to the capacity of a ruling group to protect its interests/values (internally and externally located), relative to external threats to these interests/values posed by other ruling groups. It is also the capacity of a ruling group to maintain order internally with minimal use of violence, given challenges posed by other groups, the difference between weak and strong states. Externally, ruling groups of weak states show a relatively low capacity to protect their interests. And internally, force/violence characterizes the

state's transactions with society. Although the use of violence and the emasculation of civil society make such states appear strong internally, it is only an illusion because they are in fact weak states.⁷

Second, security has to do with relations of the labor process. In this sense, security designates two organically connected relations. First is the relation between members of a society and the natural environment in which they live. Security here refers to the carrying capacity of the biophysical environment. In other words, security measures the capacity of the natural environment to sustain the physical

needs of man. In this sense, two issues are important in measuring security. One is the extent to which members of the society understand the laws of nature (science) and use this understanding to create tools (technology), thereby enhancing their capacity to derive their physical needs from nature.⁸ Second, is their capacity to *efficiently* exploit nature. Efficient exploitation in this context is what is now commonly termed sustainable development: the sustainable exploitation of nature, that is striking a balance between the exploitation of nature for man's immediate physical needs on the one hand, and its protection for his future needs on the other.

The second labor process relating to security is the relationship among members of a society. The relation between man and nature always manifests in a historically determined social form. It exists only in unity with certain relations of production expressed in social structures and institutions. Here, security means the capacity of groups (and individuals as their agents) to provide their physical and psychosocial needs and livelihoods. This means a progressive elimination of objective conditions that limit this capacity, as well as reduction of fears and anxieties about their abilities to meet these needs. In this sense, security has to do with protection from poverty, exploitation, disease, bio-chemical contamination, injustice, and the like. The issue here is the control of resource flows. In modern societies, social relations are invariably antagonistic as all groups strive to maximize security given finite resources. All groups desire security, yet problems arise when people have different perceptions and want different conditions of security.

A primary role of the state is to mediate these opposing relations and conditions of security in order to

“Local communal or traditional conflict management structures must be built into processes of conflict resolution.”

keep them within the bounds of order. To accomplish this role requires the state to “rise above” social contradictions and opposing conditions of security and appear as an impartial arbiter, always striving for consensus. By that position, it becomes possible for the state to minimize force in its management of contradictions of security. It is this issue that has been variously posed in the literature as the *problematique* of state autonomy, Bonapartism, and the national popular state.⁹

But an examination of the Nigerian state in the recent past shows that it has been unable to become popular/national. Instead of appearing as the representation of the general interests of the people-nation, the Nigerian state has been “privatized” and “parceled-out” as “means of production” for regional, ethnic, religious, class, and other special interests. Consequently, the Nigerian state has been clearly embroiled in social struggles and has been most ineffective in mediating them.

This involvement has had profound consequences for conflict and security. First, social relations are particularly conflictive and violent, as a privatized state becomes the instrument of groups prosecuting social struggles. Second, state violence, that is the aggression of the state towards targeted groups assumed to threaten state security, becomes a principal variable in social conflicts. Thus, it would be argued by some observers that what is happening in Nigeria is not conflict but state violence through militarism, even though resistance to this state violence is always defined as relations between social groups. However, this is an illusion for it is the aggression of a privatized state that appears as group conflicts.¹⁰ In other words, it is state aggression against a targeted group in a conflict, rather than the aggression of one group against another, strictly speaking, that we observe in inter-group conflicts. Consequently, state intervention in conflicts, which normally should be one of mediation, actually magnifies violence, while deflecting attention from state-sponsored violence and abuse of natural resources. Third, since the Nigerian state has become essentially a repository of violence used against specific groups, instead of

a repository of all the interests of the people-nation, the violence it vents in conflicts is devastating in terms of social cost. Finally, state violence makes conflict resolution very difficult.

This role of the state affects security in a number of ways. As the state is privatized and parceled out to groups and interests, the security of private individuals and groups becomes increasingly deflected as the security of the state. Internal security of the state, which consists in

elimination of force and violence in the maintenance of internal order, by contrast, becomes an unending cycle of conflict and violence. State violence leads to resistance by targeted groups, which leads to more state violence and more resistance. The insecurity of the state against external aggression and insecurity among victims of state violence increase tremendously. Synergy between external threat and internal/civil strife becomes increasingly possible.¹¹

Security of the environment also decreases. For one, the ability of people to protect the natural environment declines as a result of

growing social stress and violence by the state. In fact, there is a positive correlation between environmental stress and social stress. For instance, where entire villages are sacked by the military and people are impoverished, environmental protection will be the least of their concerns. State violence also fuels the inefficient exploitation of nature as groups that control the state use it to justify and perpetuate their unsustainable use of natural resources and degradation of the environment.

At the heart of conflicts in the Niger Delta, therefore, are different meanings of security attached to crude oil. For oil-bearing communities, security means the maintenance of the carrying capacity of the fragile Niger Delta environment. It is the realization that an unsustainable exploitation of crude oil, with its devastation of farmland and fishing waters, threatens resource flows and livelihoods for both individuals and communities as collectives. When a population feels its livelihood threatened, it feels insecure. Therefore, elimination of deprivation is a key concern of the oil-bearing commu-

“For oil-bearing communities, security means the maintenance of the carrying capacity of the fragile Niger Delta environment. State officials and petrobusiness, on the other hand, see security in terms of uninterrupted production of petroleum irrespective of environmental and social impacts.”

nities of the Niger Delta. Since the state and its allies appropriate almost all the oil wealth from these communities, they are resentful of the state and *petrobusiness* and feel that a good part of the financial resources should be re-invested in the communities.

Finally, oil-bearing communities link group security to popular mobilization, since most of these communities are made up of minority groups. In addition, a greater part of the Niger Delta is still rural and inaccessible. Although the level of education has been rising across Nigeria's rural communities since independence, a great majority of the people still lacks basic education. Certainly, getting these people to understand their plight and to do something about it requires effective mobilization through grassroots organizations, which are customarily led by the middle class. Organizations like the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP), the Movement for the Survival of Ijaw Ethnic Nationality (MOSIEN), and Ijaw Youth Council have been at the fore of popular mobilization in the Niger Delta.

To state officials and *petrobusiness*, security is defined as an uninterrupted production of crude oil at "competitive" costs. Informed by a pro-growth ideology, their concern is the production of petroleum to boost state revenues and company profits, irrespective of environmental consequences and indeed, irrespective of long-term economic irrationality. For instance, one of the paradoxes of the petroleum industry in the Niger Delta is that it destroys renewable resources like arable land and aquifers in order to extract crude oil, which is a non-renewable, finite resource.

The untenable position of state officials and *petrobusiness* has been sustained over the years by the authoritarian rule of the military in Nigeria. Having banished all forms of institutional means to express popular feelings, the military, especially under General Abacha, widely employed state violence to impose its wishes in the Niger Delta. A draconian military regime and highly mobilized communities in the Niger Delta set the stage for a decade of disaffection and spiraling violence in the region.

STATE VIOLENCE: THE SOLUTION THAT FAILED

State Violence and Popular Resistance by the Ogoni and Ijaw

The story of the relationship between the Nigerian state and the Ogoni and Ijaw, two ethnic minorities in the Niger Delta, is a useful illustration of the role of state violence in understanding the politics of oil in the

region. The Ogoni and Ijaw are important ethnic groups in understanding the story of the Niger Delta not only because in total they constitute about sixty percent of the population of the Delta, but also because they played a frontal role in resisting state violence against oil communities. They are also important because the similarities and contrasts in their strategies and state responses facilitate appreciation of the different ramifications of state-community relations in Niger Delta conflicts. For instance, while the Ogoni struggle was highly cerebral and led by the middle class and professionals, the Ijaw struggle has tended to be more militant and led by mainly unemployed youths.

Rise and Fall of Ogoni Resistance

From about 1993, the Ogoni began a massive campaign against environmental pollution, material deprivation and social exclusion, which they attributed to crude oil production by *petrobusiness* and discriminatory policies of the Nigerian state. In October 1990 they issued a Bill of Rights through their popular organization, the MOSOP. Among other things, the bill requested proper compensation for destruction of the Ogoni environment and a fair share of the \$30 billion dollars they claimed accrued to Nigeria from crude oil extracted from Ogoniland since 1958. The drafters of the bill also lamented the pervasive poverty in Ogoni, the lack of health, educational, and other social amenities, as well as the progressive disappearance of Ogoni languages as "other Nigerian languages are being forced on us."¹² Unsatisfactory response to these demands by the military regime led to acts of "resistance" by the Ogoni.

In Ogoniland, state violence has taken three major forms. First, it has taken the form of harassment of Ogoni leaders through arrests, detention, surveillance, and related tactics. Since the Ogoni campaign began in earnest in 1991, their leaders have become regular victims of the state's security and intelligence agencies. On many occasions, the then leaders of MOSOP including G.B. Leton, Kobani, and Ken Saro-Wiwa were detained and questioned. In January 1993, they were arrested in Lagos. In April of the same year, Saro-Wiwa was arrested twice. Again, on 21 June 1993, he was re-arrested together with two other MOSOP activists, N. Dube and K. Nwile. On 13 July, criminal charges were brought against them.¹³ In December 1993, Ledum Mitee, another MOSOP leader was arrested and detained without charge. Between May and June 1994, following the murders of four Ogoni leaders, several hundreds of people were arrested in Ogoniland.¹⁴

Second, state violence has been used against the Ogoni by encouraging violent conflicts between the

Ogoni and their neighbors, and using this violence as a pretext to repress the Ogoni. The government readily proclaims the clashes to be purely ethnic clashes. But, the frequency of such clashes among erstwhile peaceful neighbors, the extent of devastation, and the sophistication of weapons employed have convinced some independent observers that "broader forces might have been interested in perhaps putting the Ogonis under pressure, probably to derail their agenda."¹⁵ Between July 1993 and April 1994, there were at least three conflicts between the Ogoni and their neighbors, involving the destruction of many villages, loss of life, and refugees—the Andoni in July 1993, the Okrika in December 1993, and the Ndoki in April 1994. In each case, the security forces blamed the Ogoni.

Finally, state violence has been by direct violence using the armed forces and police. Extra-judicial killings, flogging, torture, rapes, looting, and extortion by the security forces against the Ogoni have been widely reported. In fact, following the situation in Ogoniland, the Rivers State government established an Internal Security Task Force under one Major (later Lt. Col.) Okuntimo. His job has been the systematic use of violence against the Ogoni. Indeed, Okuntimo had bragged on prime time national television that the army taught him 204 ways of killing people, but he had only used three on the Ogoni. It is not surprising that since 21 May 1994 when four Ogoni leaders were killed in the town of Giokoo, the security forces have executed at least fifty Ogonis.¹⁶ Earlier in April 1993, in what has become known as the Wilbros Affair, at least eleven Ogonis, including one woman, were shot at Biara by a detachment of the Second Amphibious Brigade based in Bori. The Ogoni were protesting the laying of a pipeline from Rumuekpe to Bori. Major U. Braimah of the Brigade claimed that his men were carrying out duties directed by the Federal Government.¹⁷

To give legal backing to some of these acts, the military government of Babangida made a catch-all decree against treason on 4 May 1993. The decree, among other things, stipulates the death penalty for anybody who organizes war against Nigeria, intimidates the President of Governors, utters or publishes words suggesting the break up of Nigeria, flies a flag, or suggests creation of a new state or local government for the country.

On their part, the Ogoni responded with increased mobilization and a media campaign against the state and oil companies, sometimes through violent demonstrations spearheaded by the MOSOP. The strategy of violent demonstrations was the immediate (but not remote) cause of the division within MOSOP. A weakened MOSOP, in turn, meant the intensification of state vio-

lence and sounded the death knell of the Ogoni struggle.

End of Ogoni Resistance

The implosion of MOSOP, which culminated in the killing of four Ogoni leaders by their own people on 21 May 1994, did not surprise many. Following the Wilbros Affair in April 1993, some leaders of MOSOP were accused of selling-out to government. The rancor generated by that episode had hardly died down when a controversial decision by MOSOP led to the boycott of the 12 June Presidential election that year. At the time, it was obvious that the leadership of the Movement had been split into two. Some accused Ken Saro-Wiwa of being brash, foolhardy, confrontational, and authoritarian, claiming that he created the National Youth Council of Ogoni People (NYCOP) as a private army for intimidating and eliminating his enemies. They also accused him of planning to kill thirteen Ogoni leaders, among them some of those who later died on 21 May 1994.

On 21 June 1993, the security forces arrested Ken Saro-Wiwa in relation to the boycott of the presidential election by the Ogoni. In reaction, Ogoni youths, probably members of NYCOP, went on the rampage. Their demonstration was later seized on by their neighbors, the Andoni, to attack some Ogoni villages like Kaa in August 1994. The Saro-Wiwa faction of MOSOP rejected a subsequent peace accord brokered by the Rivers State government. Exchanges of angry letters among leaders of the Movement followed until Gokana, one of the five clans making up the Ogoni ethnic group, repudiated MOSOP and Saro-Wiwa in the so-called Giokoo Accord of March 1994. At that point, the implosion of MOSOP was completed and the struggle became Ogoni against Ogoni.

The popular view in Nigeria is that the division within the Ogoni leadership was an ideological one between moderates led by Dr. Leton, president of the movement, and militants led by Saro-Wiwa. However, it is more than an ideological view. Without doubt, the mass of Ogoni people joined MOSOP to protect their livelihoods. Nevertheless, their leaders were essentially interested in personal power and money. The Nigerian petty bourgeoisie is not given to ideological fidelity. They are simply power fetishists. In any case, they lack the discipline and strength of character to pursue any ideological line consistently. Money and power always overrides. Moderates could become militants and militants moderates in a short space of time.

The tragedy of popular movements in Nigeria is the inability of the ordinary people to impose their interests on the leadership. Since popular control rarely

exists, popular movements led by the petty-bourgeoisie easily degenerate into authoritarianism. The tendency of this class is to concentrate power in themselves, first as leaders of the people and then as individuals. Collective leadership remains difficult. The signs are always clear: internal bickering and self-seeking maneuvers for power and money. Moderation and militancy are only strategies, not philosophies. In short, a successful mass movement like MOSOP was destined to implode and crumble as a result of leadership in-fighting, especially because of the money and power that it was able to garner.

The Ijaw Egbesu Wars

The Ogoni have passed the mantle of leading the struggle of the people of the Niger Delta to the Ijaw. Since the implosion of MOSOP, Ijaw youths have increasingly taken center stage. In August 1997, over 10,000 youths from across the Delta demonstrated at Aleibiri in Ekeremor Local Area of Bayelsa State to demand an end to all Shell activities in the Niger Delta. Aleibiri was chosen as the focus of the demonstration because, according to the youths, Shell has refused to clear an oil spill that occurred there on 18 March 1997. Even at the time, evidence clearly pointed to more conflicts between the state, oil companies, and Ijaw youths, in spite of repeated claims by government that peace had returned to the area. Speaking at the Aleibiri gathering, a community leader and retired Navy Lieutenant, Chief Augustine Anthony, clearly stated that Ijaw youths would fight until there was freedom in the Niger Delta because “we have been exploited for so long.”¹⁸

Within one year, Ijawland exploded again. Between mid-1998 and January 1999, Bayelsa State was in turmoil. The Ijaw inhabit Bayelsa, one of the main petroleum producing states in Nigeria. What became known as the first *Egbesu* war began when an Ijaw youth leader was arrested and detained by the military Governor of the State during the rule of General Abacha. He was held without trial in the Government House (the military Governor’s official residence) for distributing “seditious” documents questioning the financial probity of the governor. In reaction, a group of youths said to be members of an Ijaw cult, the *Egbesu*, stormed the Government House in Yenagoa, disarmed the guards and released their leader. Many residents of Yenagoa, includ-

ing policemen and soldiers, believe that members of the cult were able to break into the well-guarded Government House because they wore charms that made them impervious to bullets. The success of the first *Egbesu* war obviously enhanced the profile of the youths and

the cult, and encouraged more young people, many of whom were unemployed, to join the protests. In a matter of weeks, the invincibility of the *Egbesu* had spread throughout Ijawland and beyond. The success of the *Egbesu* youth in the “first war” also fed into wider demands by the Ijaw for more petroleum revenues. Prior to the *Egbesu*, the Ijaw National Council and the Movement for the Survival of Ijaw Ethnic Nationality (MOSIEN) had made vociferous demands for more petroleum

revenues to be allocated to the Ijaw. The formation of MOSIEN was largely influenced by MOSOP, the Ogoni organization.

The death of the dictator Abacha in June 1998, improvements in human rights, and an expansion of the political space made it possible for Ijaw demands to become more openly articulated and massively pursued. The first *Egbesu* war had guaranteed a central role for the youth in this new dispensation. This guarantee became clear in late 1998 following a spate of oil installation hijackings by Ijaw youths. This phase of resistance, as the youths called it, culminated in a grand Convention of Ijaw Youths in Kaiama town. The meeting issued a document addressed to the government and oil companies requesting more local control of oil revenues and better environmental practices. The *Kaiama Declaration* also gave the government until 31 December 1998 to respond positively to their demands. The government upped the ante with a spate of condemnations and threats to use force against the youths. In his new year/budget broadcast on 1 January 1999, the Head of State General Abubakar, gave indications of military action against the youths. Since early December 1998, there had been massive military build-up in Bayelsa State by the government, including the positioning of frigates in the Gulf of Guinea. Throughout December 1998 and early January 1999, Bayelsa State was virtually under siege. The second *Egbesu* war started when military men in Yenagoa, the capital of Bayelsa State, confronted

“Differences of class, gender, and generation should be addressed if productive community relations and conflict resolution systems are to be developed in the Niger Delta.”

Ijaw youths participating in a cultural festival. In the ensuing violence, which lasted for over one week, many Ijaw youths lost their lives in Yenagoa and Kaiama, property worth millions of Naira was destroyed, and scores of people were displaced.

A DEMOCRATIC APPROACH?

Following the unbending resistance of oil-bearing communities and the steady international condemnation of the policies of the military government and oil companies in the Niger Delta, *petrobusiness* began to preach a new “community-based” approach to its activities in the Niger Delta. Ostensibly, this change in attitude arose from a re-evaluation by the oil giants of their activities in the developing world. For instance, in a rare case of *mea culpa* Shell embarked on a worldwide review of its policy regarding its host communities. The commencement of this review was widely publicized even if its outcome was far less so. However, from 1997 it was clear that for oil companies to regain access into the oil-bearing communities, they had to alter their attitude toward the people. The giants like Shell had been forced to shut down operations in many parts of the Delta costing them and the military government an estimated \$1 million daily. At that point, *petrobusiness* realized that the violent solution of the military government, which they had widely supported with money and munitions (the dreaded Rivers State internal security force was said to have been funded and equipped by Shell), could not secure their oil installations.

Everywhere, oil companies began to drum up support for this new approach. Its thrust, according to them, was a new partnership of all stakeholders in the petroleum industry. The stakeholders were the oil communities, *petrobusiness*, and government. Oil companies began to set up autonomous community relations units, manned by community development specialists. In addition, the new approach sought to negotiate access directly with oil communities rather than through government. Hitherto, oil companies sought to absolve themselves from the desolation of the Niger Delta by claiming to be tenants of government and not the local communities. They also claimed that they met all their contractual obligations to the Nigerian government and so could not be held responsible for the failures of government. This claim may well be correct in law because a previous military regime (ironically headed by the present civilian President) had passed an unpopular decree in 1978 declaring all land and minerals under it the property of the state. The change in attitude by the oil

companies was a realization that with the situation on the ground, that law was passé.

The new emphasis was on Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) by stakeholders. Each MOU detailed the duties, responsibilities, and benefits of the stakeholders. Essentially, the oil companies committed themselves to the development of host communities. In return, the communities pledged to protect installations and to solve problems through dialogue. For its part, the government was expected to serve as the umpire. An added element of this “new” approach was the increasing involvement of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and community-based organizations (CBOs) with the oil companies. This element came about partly because of the prominent role that these organizations played as advocates of the oil-bearing communities against the military dictatorship and *petrobusiness*.

Unfortunately, the MOUs remain elitist in both conception and content. To illustrate, in the Memorandum of Understanding between the Bonny Kingdom and the Joint Industry Company, the collective working on the liquefied natural gas project in the area, little or no grassroots consultations took place.¹⁹ First, the signing of the document involved the elite of the Bonny society, most of whom live outside the Kingdom, government officials, and the oil companies. Secondly, the projects envisaged under the Memorandum included paving of roads, electricity, water treatment, and a master plan for the town. These are clearly trappings of urban elite life. Across the Niger Delta, there is a deep-seated feeling among unemployed youth and rural dwellers that such elite demands distort their struggles by fostering a pecuniary interpretation of their problems. In many cases, the urban-based elite holds positions that run counter to those of their people living at “home” in the rural areas. Many rural dwellers say that while these demands are not necessarily bad, they tend to favor only the vocal, urban-based people who understand the language of compensation and are in a position to enjoy the social amenities provided. In the process, the simple needs of the vast majority are bypassed.

The youth remain the powder keg. Unable to get proper schooling or stable employment, they constitute a “reserve army” for social discontent. Frustration associated with aspirations to elite status makes the youth of the Niger Delta very volatile. The point is that to assume, as oil companies presently do, that their host communities are internally monolithic is wrong. Differences of class, gender, and generation should be addressed if productive community relations and conflict resolution systems are to be developed in the Niger Delta. Existing MOUs do not seem to be doing that.

Finding the legitimate representatives of the communities is also a problem encumbering MOUs. During the period of military repression in the Niger Delta, the oil companies shot themselves in the foot by helping to hunt down the true representatives of the communities, who were described as trouble makers and security risks. Many of them were killed, others went into exile, and most have been cowed. Illegitimate, government-installed chiefs, extortionists, and other charlatans filled the vacuum created by their exit. Consequently, in many cases the response of the ordinary members of the communities has been cynicism towards the recent overtures of the oil companies.

The born-again community-based approach of the oil companies seems to have anticipated the end of military dictatorship and inauguration of an elected government under President Obasanjo, himself a former army general. There has been great optimism locally and internationally that the new civilian administration will resolve the festering sore of violent conflicts in the Niger Delta. In fact, many observers suggest that the litmus test for the success of the new administration will be events in the Niger Delta.

Early on, the new government seemed conscious of the importance of the problem in the Niger Delta. Soon after his inauguration, President Obasanjo toured the area, preaching the need for non-violent resolution of conflicts between communities, government, and oil companies. The President immediately followed this with consultations with representatives of communities and other stakeholders in the petroleum industry. Finally, a Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) would take charge of development activities in the Niger Delta to supplement the direct efforts of the federal, state, and local governments.

Two approaches to conflict resolution in the Niger Delta have emerged since the new civilian government came into office. The first suggests that civil society organizations have done their work by mobilizing communities to resist the militarist state and insensitive oil companies. Now, they and the communities must allow the elected representatives of the people acting through democratic structures like local councils, state assemblies, and governors, the national assembly, and the presidency, as well as the judiciary to tackle the problems. This approach advocates patience and an understanding that the wheel of democratic government

grinds slowly. The second approach insists that while occupants of structures that dictated the problems in the Delta may have changed, the structures themselves and their internal dynamics have changed very little. Therefore, communities and civil society need to practice continued vigilance to ensure fundamental transformations. An important aspect of this transformation is to renegotiate Nigeria's fiscal federalism to ensure that communities of the Delta retain the bulk of

resources generated from their land. As such, they note that the constitution given by the military, which gave birth to the present government, is flawed and requires re-negotiation in a sovereign national conference.

The continued violence in the Niger Delta suggests that the two positions

are still not reconciled. Violent conflicts continue to occur across the Delta, both between government and communities, and among communities themselves. Since the new government came into being, there has been trouble in Bonny, which delayed the take off of the huge liquefied gas project there, Eleme and Okrika, Oleh, Choba, and Odi, among others. The Odi case seems to confirm the fears of the human rights community in Nigeria that it will take some time before the vestiges of state violence as a solution to the Niger Delta problem are eliminated.

Odi is the second largest town in Bayelsa State, after the capital Yenagoa. In mid-November 1999, Odi youths took several policemen hostage and later tortured them to death. The team of policemen had gone to the town to investigate rumors that some Ijaw youths were mobilizing to storm Lagos in reprisal for attacks a month earlier on Ijaw by the Lagos-based Yoruba youth group the Oodua Peoples Congress (OPC). It was widely believed that the OPC attacks on Ijaw residents of the Lagos suburb of Ajegunle were a carryover from the conflicts in the State of Ondo between the Ijaw and Ilaje, a Yoruba clan. The government interpreted the killing of the policemen as a renewal of the activities of the *Egbesu*. However, it is known that one of the leaders of the youths that murdered the policemen at Odi was in fact a member of the ruling Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), the party of both President Obasanjo and Governor Diepreye Alamiyeseigha of Bayelsa State. This youth leader is known to be very influential among Ijaw youths and mobilized them to support the PDP in the guber-

“ [S]ecurity has to do with protection from poverty, exploitation, disease, bio-chemical contamination, injustice, and the like.”

natorial elections of January 1999.

In response to the death of the policemen, President Obasanjo ordered Governor Alamieyeseigha to produce the culprits. When this failed, Obasanjo ordered in the army. The consequence was chilling: over one hundred inhabitants dead, many more missing, thousands forced to flee, and virtually no house standing in Odi. As if this devastation were not enough, the President in a televised interview ordered security forces to shoot rioters at sight. These draconian measures have been widely criticized in Nigeria, but the government continues to defend its actions. In fact, the general attitude in the Niger Delta today is not whether there will be more trouble, but when and where.

Part of the problem is the lingering militarist disposition among individual members of the civilian government and the communities of the Niger Delta. President Obasanjo's support for the summary execution of riotous youths and saboteurs of oil installations in his recent "shoot-at-sight" orders to the police capture this disposition. In fact, the government is setting up a special paramilitary force to deal summarily with people who vandalize petroleum pipelines. Such militarist tendencies are still very much ingrained in government circles. On the part of the Niger Delta people, years of military repression have left them brutalized but militarized. The culture of violence is deep-seated in the region.²⁰

CONCLUSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The root of conflict in the Niger Delta rests in the different meanings of security. On the one hand, local communities see the current pattern of petroleum exploitation, which devastates the environment, as a threat to security of livelihoods. State officials and *petrobusiness*, on the other hand, see security in terms of uninterrupted production of petroleum irrespective of environmental and social impacts. The long rule of the military failed to forge the consensus necessary for a peaceful management of this *conflict of securities*. Instead, the military sought through state violence to impose the interests of *petrobusiness*. This practice made the Niger Delta ungovernable. A spiral of violence enveloped the area in the last ten years as local populations mobilized to confront state violence. Repression failed. It failed precisely because it excluded the people. As such, oil companies have recently been claiming a new community and people orientation for their projects. This new attitude dovetails into the efforts of the new civilian government to address the Niger Delta problem. However, contin-

ued violence and disaffection suggest that fundamental problems remain.

Policymakers continue to get it wrong in the Niger Delta by believing that the problem is money. True, the elite will continue to push for more money and contracts. However, beyond the nummular interests of the elite, there are fundamental questions of participation and social rights, both for individuals and for whole communities. The solution to the Niger Delta's problem cannot be achieved only by providing amenities and paying compensation. It has to transcend these and make it possible for the people and their authentic representatives to share in real decision-making with *petrobusiness*. Such a fundamental change will not come from the isolated activities of individual oil companies or the good intentions of a benevolent government. Instead, its achievement is linked to resolving the fundamental questions of the Nigerian federation, especially fiscal control and the position of ethnic minorities. This question of federalism must be an integral part of the project to create a true democracy built on good governance and transparency in Nigeria. However, in the short term a new regime of conflict management in the Niger Delta is necessary. First, such a regime must de-emphasize monetary compensation to individuals and middlemen. Instead, investment in community development projects, arrived at in full agreement with the local residents, should be emphasized. Community development investments should aim at building the stock of local human capital instead of just putting money in the pockets of individuals. Monetary compensation has tended to spawn "compensation merchants" and "conflict entrepreneurs" in the Niger Delta. These careerists exploit the grief of local people for personal financial ends. For example, it is known that "conflict entrepreneurs" go to communities affected by oil spills buying damaged nets and poisoned seafood for purposes of claiming compensation and grants from government, oil companies, and international funding agencies.

Second, because the alliance between state bureaucracy and *petrobusiness* under the military was a central *casus belli* in the Niger Delta, a new conflict management regime in the region must be one that seeks to break and transcend this alliance. Therefore, it must marginalize state bureaucracy, particularly the coercive organs of the state. The people and their popular representatives in government and civil society must be the bedrock of conflict resolution. Local communal or traditional conflict management structures must be built into processes of conflict resolution. Often, these traditional conflict management structures emphasize consultation and consensus, rather than imposition,

which was the preferred orientation under the military.

Third, the oil companies must fundamentally alter their penchant to cast themselves as outsiders instead of responsible local corporate citizens. Oil companies tend to ally too closely with state officials, especially under the military. At best, they try to cast themselves as neutral in the conflict between government and people. This is backed up with massive public relations and image laundering by the oil companies. However, all these strategies are counterproductive. Local people continue to associate oil companies with government, including bad governments. Oil companies have evaded public scrutiny and accountability. Companies need to maintain a studied distance from government and to become more accountable to the local communities.

Finally, the government should set up a Trust Fund for the Niger Delta with an elected board of trustees. Trustees should be elected on a non-party basis from the communities in the Niger Delta. A public hearing on the nominated candidates should precede their final confirmation by the State Assembly to stand the election. The trustees should have a consolidated remuneration fixed by the National Assembly. They are not to be paid from the Niger Delta Trust Fund. The board of trustees should be the sole determinants of the use of the Trust Fund. The NDDC could then become the bureaucratic arm of the Trust Fund, manned by experts in capital investment, project development, and fundraising. ■

NOTES

¹ *Petrobusiness* refers to all aspects of the petroleum industry not just the oil companies that extract and sell crude oil (e.g., oil refineries, oil services).

² Shell Petroleum Development Company, *The Nigeria Brief: The Ogoni Issue*, Lagos: The Shell Petroleum Development Company of Nigeria Limited, 1995: 1.

³ In many parts of the Niger Delta, water hyacinths are a non-native species whose growth has been propelled by the activities of the oil companies.

⁴ Clingendael Institute, *Seminar on Intra-state Conflict and Options for Policy: Seminar Documentation*, The Hague: Netherlands Institute for International Relations, 1998:4.

⁵ N. Onishi, "Deep in the Republic of Chevron," *The New York Times Magazine* (July 4, 1999).

⁶ Okechukwu Ibeanu, 'Ogoni - oil, resource flow and conflict' in Granfelt, T. (ed) *Managing the Globalized Environment*, London: Intermediate Technology Publications, 1999.

⁷ Samir Amin. "Preface: The State and the Question of Development," In *Popular Struggles for Democracy in Africa*, ed. P. Anyang' Nyong'o. London: Zed Press and United Nations University, 1987: 3-5.

⁸ See Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, Enugu: Ikenga Publishers, 1982.

⁹ Cf. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971; Hamza Alavi, "The State in Post-Colonial Societies: Pakistan and Bangladesh." *New Left Review* 74 (1972); Colin Leys, "The 'overdeveloped' post-colonial state: re-evaluation." *Review of African Political Economy*. 5 (1976); Nicos Poulantzas, *Political Power and Social Classes*. London: Verso, 1978; Claude Ake, "The Future of the State in Africa." *International Political Science Review* 6:1 (1985); Eme Ekekwe, *Class and State in Nigeria*, Lagos:

Longman, 1986; and Okechukwu Ibeanu, "The State and the Market: Reflections on Ake's Analysis of the State in the Periphery." *Africa Development* 18:3 (1993).

¹⁰ Claude Ake *et al.*, "The Causes of Conflict in Africa," Center for Advanced Social Science, Port Harcourt (mimeo), not dated: 9 (b).

¹¹ James Rosenau, ed. *International Aspects of Civil Strife*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964.

¹² Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP) *Ogoni Bill of Rights*. Port Harcourt: Saros International Publishers, 1992: 10-11.

¹³ See Okechukwu Ibeanu, "Ogonis: Oil and Environmental Conflict in Nigeria." *Nigeria Now* 2:11 (1993); and Human Rights Watch, "Nigeria: The Ogoni Crisis: A Case-study of Military Repression in Southeastern Nigeria." *Human Rights Watch/Africa* 7:5 (1995).

¹⁴ Human Rights Watch, 1995.

¹⁵ Claude Ake quoted in Human Rights Watch, 1995: 12.

¹⁶ *Ibid*: 17.

¹⁷ *Ibid*.

¹⁸ *The Guardian Newspaper*, Lagos, Nigeria (28 March 1994).

¹⁹ Okechukwu Ibeanu, "Bringing the Local People Back In: Community-Based Environmental Conflict Management in the Niger Delta, Nigeria." Paper presented at the Open Meeting of the Human Dimensions of Global Environmental Change Research Community, Shonan Village, Kanagawa, Japan, 24-26 June 1999.

²⁰ Goddy Nwabueze, "Contextualizing the Niger Delta Crisis." *CASS Newsletter* 6:2 (1999).