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BEHIND THE MASK

Explaining the Emergence of the MEND Militia in Nigeria's Oil-Bearing Niger Delta

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1. INTRODUCTION

'They have taken crafty counsel against thy people; and consulted against thy hidden ones. They have said, Come, and let us cut them off from being a nation.'

Oboko Bello, President of Federated Niger Delta Ijaw Communities (FNDIC), quoting
Psalm 83:1-5.

The fragile truce brokered between Nigeria's central government and the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) in April 2006 jerked to a bloody halt on 20th August. On that afternoon soldiers of the Joint Task Force, a contingent of the Nigerian Army, Navy and Air Force deployed by the government to enforce its authority on the restive oil-bearing Niger Delta ambushed fifteen members of the MEND militia in the creeks of western delta and murdered them. The dead men had gone to negotiate the release of a Shell Oil worker kidnapped by youth in Letugbene, a neighbouring community. The Shell staff also died in the massacre.

The incident occurred five days after Olusegun Obasanjo, Nigeria's President, instructed armed forces commanders in the region to resort to force and quickly 'pacify' the region. This marked a sharp turn-around from the promise Obasanjo gave to representatives of the MEND militia in Abuja, the capital, in early April that he would utilise dialogue and carefully-targeted development projects in a new initiative to return peace, law and accountable government to the impoverished Niger Delta.

The streets of Warri, the city where Shell and ChevronTexaco's western delta operations are based, were thick with tension on the morning of 2 September when Ijo youth converged on Warri Central Hospital in the suburbs to retrieve the corpses of their colleagues and commence the burial ceremonies. The Ijaw are the largest ethnic group in the Niger Delta. The MEND militia draws the bulk of its membership from the Ijaw.

Significantly, there were several prominent Ijaw political and civic leaders at the ceremony. Ordinary people, mainly Ijaw peasant farmers and fisher folk, had left their hoes and fishing nets and travelled from their hamlets in the creeks to pay their last respects to the slain. Spokesmen of the Nigerian government had sought to represent the fifteen militias as 'irresponsible hostage-takers' in the wake of the slaughter. But those massed at the hospital that morning spoke only of heroes who had fallen in the battle for 'Ijaw liberation.' MEND, it was clear to observers, was firmly embedded in the Ijaw communities from which it emerged in February 2006, and continue to enjoy the support

of youth and impoverished peasants alike whose farm lands and fishing creeks – their sole source of livelihood - have been destroyed by half a century of uncontrolled oil production and whose cause they took up arms to champion.

Even so, members of the MEND militia have never seen armed force as a suitable and effective weapon, but only as a tactical tool they were forced to wield as a last resort after three decades of peaceful entreaty was replied with cynical indifference, from the central government and the oil companies. Leaders of the Federated Niger Delta Ijaw Communities (FNDIC), a civic group whose headquarters is in Gbaramatu, an Ijaw clan in which MEND's activities is very pronounced, have served as informal representatives of the MEND militia in negotiations with President Obasanjo and Nigeria's central government following the abduction of nine foreign oil workers in the creeks of the delta in February. When the author interviewed Oboko Bello, President of FNDIC in Warri in early August, two weeks before the Letugbene massacre, he spoke warmly about the peace meeting he and other Ijaw leaders had had in Abuja with Obasanjo and other government officials on April 5 and 18 2006, and assured that MEND militants would put their weapons permanently beyond use if the government went some way to address the long-standing grievances of his people.¹

But it was a sorrowful and stone-faced Bello who addressed his fellow Ijaw during the burial ceremony that afternoon in Warri. He said: 'Shell officials were privy to the arrangements Ijaw patriots had made as part of the Joint Investigation and Verification exercise to free the captured company worker and also facilitate the re-opening of the company's facilities in the creeks. Shell was in direct communication with the commanders of the Joint Task Force, even up to the time our young men set out in their boats to rescue the Shell worker in Letugbene. These young men were not hostage takers. They were Ijaw patriots, selflessly working to repair the damaged peace between the oil company and our people. For this they were ambushed and murdered by soldiers in the service of Shell.'²

Although Oboko Bello ended his one-hour speech on a note of conciliation, arguing that the peace process between the MEND militia and the government that was begun on 12 March following a meeting between President Obasanjo and prominent Ijaw leaders must not be allowed to be derailed, angry voices are rising all over the creeks vowing revenge. These are young men - the volatile, striking arm of the Ijaw political and civic resurgence. Whether moderate voices will be able to rein them in remain to be seen.

¹ Ike Okonta, interview with Oboko Bello, President of Federated Niger Delta Ijaw Communities (FNDIC), Warri, 14th August 2006. In summary, Ijaw representatives asked for the creation of two states, in addition to Bayelsa state, for their people to be carved out of the existing states of Edo, Ondo, Cross Rivers, Rivers, and Akwa Ibom. They also asked that fifty per cent of oil revenue derived from the Niger Delta be given to the communities, that Ijaw businessmen be given a greater pie in the oil industry, and that the central government withdraw armed troops from the region and compel Shell and the other oil companies to put an end to incessant oil spills and gas flaring.

² Oboko Bello, 'FNDIC Presentation During Burial Ceremony of Nine out of Fifteen Illustrious Sons Killed While Serving the Purpose of SPDC in Letugbene Community,' Presented in Warri, Delta State, 2 September, 2006.

For its part, the central government has adopted a new defiant, militaristic posture, publicly announcing in late August that it was now collaborating closely with the US and British governments to deploy more naval personnel and new hardware to 'root out oil rustlers, kidnappers and other undesirable elements from the Niger Delta and the wider Gulf of Guinea.'³ To the MEND militants hunkered down in their heavily fortified redoubts in the creeks, this sounded ominously like an open declaration of war.

FNDIC leaders who spoke to the author shortly after the burial ceremony expressed the concern that the government's belligerent posture could be an attempt to generate political turbulence in the Niger delta during the general elections, due in April 2007, and thus provide an opportunity for Obasanjo to impose an interim government and extend his tenure beyond the constitutionally-stipulated two terms. Although the elections had been massively rigged in the region and even more so in the Ijaw areas by the ruling Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) in 1999 and again in 2003, FNDIC officials continue to hold out the hope that fair elections in which the Ijaw would be fairly represented will provide the solution to the political and economic crisis in which they are trapped. They insist they will continue to work zealously to thwart any attempt to prevent free elections from taking place in Ijaw communities next April.

But elections in Nigeria and the Niger Delta in particular, are usually turbulent affairs, sometimes descending into the bloody and violent. As was the case in the past, politicians are replenishing their arms caches and resuscitating the network of thugs they rely on to intimidate their rivals, coerce voters to do their bidding, or stuff the ballot boxes outright. The region is awash with small arms and hard cash yet again, and the already volatile cocktail of local resentment of the oppressive activities of the government and the oil companies looks set to blend with guns for hire prowling the creeks and sire another bloody inferno.

Spectacle

The MEND militia and its political sponsors set out in the early months of the year to draw the attention of the world to the parlous condition of the Ijaw people deploying spectacle as a powerful weapon. Images of armed youth in masks wielding sub-machine guns in the creeks and helpless oil workers at their mercy, squatting in the bowels of speedboats, were beamed to the media all over the world through a skilful use of the internet.

These graphic images generated intense emotions in government circles as well as in the environmental and human rights community in the West. Global oil prices surged and fell with the tone of MEND's press statements, and the physical condition of the captives whose photographs they put out on the net. But the drama invariably ended on a peaceful note, with MEND setting the oil workers free unharmed. After the spate of armed attacks on the facilities of Shell and two other oil companies in the western delta following

³ Onyebuchi Ezigbo, 'Niger Delta: Britain, US Offer Assistance to Nigeria,' ThisDay, Lagos, 31 August, 2006.

MEND's emergence in February, there seemed to be an unspoken agreement between the militants and the government that this drama could go on, and the actors permitted to air their grievances on the world stage, as long as the oil workers periodically taken hostage were not harmed.

Following the Letugbene murders, the outrage with which this bloody event was greeted by Ijaw youth in the creeks, and rising political tensions all over the country, there is no knowing whose voice will command allegiance in the coming months – the moderates counselling patience and political participation or the young hotheads eager to return to the creeks and take on the government and the oil companies they are allied with.

2. PRELUDE TO AN UPRISING

Before the emergence of MEND, the last time the Ijaw took up arms against the Nigerian government in an organised effort to assert their political rights was forty years ago. In February 1966, Isaac Adaka Boro, a graduate of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, formed the Niger Delta Volunteer Service (NDVS), a militia comprising of several young and educated Ijaw men, and declared the Ijaw-speaking areas of Nigeria's then Eastern Region an independent 'Niger Delta Republic.' In an eleven-point declaration of independence, Boro declared that 'all former agreements as regards the crude oil of the people undertaken by the now defunct "Nigerian" government in the territory have been declared invalid,' and that 'all oil companies are commanded ...to stop exploration and renew agreements with the new Republic. Defiance of this order will result in dislocation of the company's exploration and forfeiture of their rights of renewal of such agreements.'⁴

Although Federal troops, directed from Enugu, the regional capital soon quashed Isaac Boro's uprising, the twelve-day revolt jolted the nation, focussed attention on the travails of the riverian communities of the Eastern Region, and re-opened debate about their demand, since the Willincks hearing in 1958, to be separated from the Eastern Region in an independent state of their own. At the time the Eastern Region was dominated by the more populous Igbo ethnic group, obliging the Ijaw, Ibibio, Ogoni and other smaller groups to band together and ask for a new 'Rivers State.'

Boro and his two associates, Sam Owonaro and Nottingham Dick, were arrested and imprisoned. Developments elsewhere in the country were soon to alter the fortunes of the three militants in a dramatic manner. Nigeria had been convulsed in political crisis following independence from Britain in October 1960. At the heart of the dispute was the unwieldy three-region structure that the departing colonialists bequeathed to the country, ensuring that the Northern region, led by Muslim feudal lords who had cooperated with British administrators in governing the country, were given the largest slice, bigger than the Western and Eastern Region combined. Northern politicians were quick to turn this numerical advantage into political and economic rewards, introducing a corrupt and authoritarian mode of rule in the country that enabled them to transfer wealth derived from the south to their own region. In January 1966 five young army majors, the bulk of Igbo extraction, staged a military coup in an attempt to overthrow the civilian government and put an end to the drift towards misgovernment. Several leading politicians and senior Army officers, including the Prime Minister and the Premier of the Northern Region, were killed. The bulk of those that lost their lives were northerners. Casualty figures in the East were light, leading to accusation by northern officers that the January coup was a plot by Igbo officers and politicians to take over the government of the country by force.

⁴ See Tony Tebekaemi, *The Twelve Day Revolution*, Ethiope Publishing Company, Benin City, 1982, p. 12. See also Kathryn N. Nwajiaku, 'Oil Politics and Identity Transformation in Nigeria: The Case of the Ijaw in the Niger Delta,' Unpublished DPhil thesis, Department of Politics, University of Oxford, 2005, for an excellent scholarly study of the political context of Isaac Boro's revolt in 1966.

Six months later, in July 1966, northern officers staged a counter-coup, attempted to pull the North out of the Federation, but then changed their mind at the last minute (under pressure from the British High Commissioner and the American Ambassador). Leaders of the coup had killed the military Head of State, General Ironsi, an Igbo who had taken over the reins of government after the January coup had collapsed as the most senior officer in the Army. Over three hundred other officers, the bulk of them from the Eastern Region, were also murdered. The coup leaders appointed Yakubu Gowon, a lieutenant colonel and fellow northerner, Head of State and declared that the Ironsi government had been overthrown.

The military administrator of the Eastern Region, Col. Emeka Ojukwu, refused to recognise Gowon as Head of State, and insisted that the late Ironsi's second in command, Brigadier Ogundipe take over. Relations between the two sides deteriorated swiftly. Fearing that the East was about to secede, the Gowon regime, hunkered down in Lagos, the Federal capital, split the country into twelve new states in May 1967, two for the ethnic minority groups of the Eastern Region. The Ijaw formed the bulk of the new Rivers State. Ojukwu responded a few days later by declaring the East the Republic of Biafra, and declared the new state independent of Nigeria. Federal troops invaded Biafra and civil war broke out. Isaac Boro and his compatriots were released from prison by Federal troops when they overran the riverain parts of Biafra. He subsequently joined the Federal side as a major and commanded his own unit under the Third (Marine Commando) Division. Boro was to die in battle a few weeks before the war ended.

The bloody civil war which raged for thirty months and in which an estimated three million people died, was to profoundly alter Nigeria's political landscape. The war ended in January 1970 with a Federal victory. Although the Ijaw had reason to be content, having secured the new state they had been asking for since the 1950s, the euphoria was to prove short-lived. The central government had passed on to a victorious federal army the bulk of whose commanders were from the now defunct Northern Region. These officers quickly turned their attention to the oil wells of the Niger Delta, and in cooperation with civil servants, pushed through a number of military edicts that nationalised the delta oil fields, altered the formula for sharing revenue so where previously fifty percent of revenue went to the region or state from which it was derived, all the states now had an equal share, with the central government in Lagos keeping the lion's share for itself.

The new fiscal regime, which now left the Ijaw and the other oil-bearing communities of the Niger Delta at a distinct disadvantage, took nearly ten years to achieve. The process began in the heat of the civil war, when the Gowon government enacted Decree 15 of 1969, removing the control of the oil fields from their states of origin and putting this in its own control. By the time the soldiers handed over to a new civilian government in October 1979, a rash of decrees and edicts, ending with the 1978 Land Use Act that confiscated the oil-bearing land of the delta communities and put this under the 'protection' of the central government, had transformed the Niger Delta into a colony whose inhabitants bore the brunt of the oil production on which the national economy relied heavily but enjoyed none of the benefits.

The new civilian government, under President Shehu Shagari, a northerner, was effete, purposeless and corrupt. This ill-fated Second Republic was overthrown in December 1983 by General M. Buhari. On Buhari's watch, the portion of oil revenue that went to the Ijaw and the other oil-bearing communities of the Niger Delta plunged to a derisory 1.5 per cent, down from 20 two years previously. Meanwhile Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC), the local subsidiary of the Anglo-Dutch oil giant, and other Western oil companies operating in the Niger Delta continued to benefit from the legislations that had successfully reduced the delta communities to squatters on their own land. Shell had begun to produce oil in 1956, and now accounted for half of the country's total oil production of two million barrels per day.

By the provisions of the legal regime guiding oil production, the oil companies were not required to obtain the permission of the local communities on whose land and creeks they sought to explore for and mine oil. They were only answerable to government officials far away in the capital. All that the oil companies were asked to do was pay 'compensation' to local people for crops and other valuables destroyed in the course of oil production. Estimation was largely left to the discretion of Shell officials, and they were quick to take advantage of this and undercut the local people. Environmental protection laws were also flagrantly breached by all the companies, resulting in the devastation of the farm lands and fishing creeks on which the Ijaw and the other communities had relied for livelihood for millennia.⁵ Where previously decades of government neglect had reduced the delta communities to excruciating poverty, now their very existence was threatened.

General Ibrahim Babangida overthrew General Buhari in a palace coup in August 1985, and introduced a Structural Adjustment Programme, supervised by the IMF. Ostensibly designed to ameliorate the financial crisis into which decades of corrupt and inefficient government had plunged the country, Babangida's new economic policies only succeeded in plunging the people into worse poverty. The currency was devalued, hiking the price of imported necessities. Social services were cut. Millions were retrenched from jobs in government and the private sector.

The already impoverished Delta communities felt the new harsh economic climate particularly keenly. There were neither factories nor government jobs in the region. The enclave oil economy employed a handful of local people; even as it left environmental destruction in its wake. Hospitals, roads, piped water, schools, paved roads and electric power were non-existent, and where they were supplied, grossly inadequate. As thousands of Ijaw, retrenched from their jobs in the cities and towns began to stream home in late 1980s, the Niger Delta region began to heave. It was clear to the discerning that a political storm was about to break.

⁵ For a comprehensive treatment of the social and environmental consequences of oil production in the Niger Delta, see Ike Okonta and Oronto Douglas, *Where Vultures Feast: Shell, Human Rights and Oil*, Sierra Club, San Francisco, 2001.

The first storm came in the shape of an attempted military putsch, led by Ijaw and other Delta elements in the Army. In April 1990 these young military officers stormed Dodan Barracks, sit of the central government, and reduced its perimeter walls to rubble with mortars and AK47s. But General Babangida managed to escape, rallied senior commanders to his side and mounted a counter-attack. Outflanked and outgunned the coup plotters surrendered. After a hasty trial, closed to the public, they were executed.

The defiant utterances of the young officers as they faced the firing ground, declaring that they had 'struck a blow for the oppressed people of the Niger Delta in the spirit of Isaac Boro', and the economic upheavals in the delta and the wider country that led to this bloody episode, were to prepare the ground for the emergence of the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) sixteen years later.⁶

⁶ Ihuoma Iwegbu, 'Why they Struck,' National Concord, Lagos, 24 April, 1990.

3. MEND: ANATOMY OF A PEOPLES' MILITIA

The first thing that strikes you on meeting members of the MEND militia is the ease with which they move about in Warri metropolis, and also in the creek villages, indicating clearly that they are amongst people who not only identify with their cause but also go out of their way to offer them protection and safe havens during attacks by Nigerian soldiers. However, their movements are constrained by the ever-prowling soldiers.

The second thing you notice is that the militants, or the ones elected by the others to respond to your questions, are articulate, well-educated, and conversant with latest political developments in Nigeria and other parts of the world. The introductory encounter took place in a hotel room in Warri. The author had sent word in advance that he would be arriving that Thursday afternoon, and would like to interview one or two leaders of MEND. His courier, a local journalist, said he would try to arrange the interview, but that he was not giving any firm promises as getting hold of MEND leaders would be dependent on the level of Nigerian military presence in Warri that week.

MEND leaders are constantly on the move, extremely cautious, and do not take telephone calls personally, aware of the fact that the soldiers hunting for them have electronic devices capable of pinpointing mobile phone signals with accuracy. The author was in luck. He arrived in Warri when the peace process, initiated by FNDIC leaders, Oronto Douglas, the lawyer and environmental activist, and other Ijaw leaders, was still plodding on, and the Obasanjo government appeared willing to restrain the soldiers for the negotiations to be concluded. A knock sounded on the door of his hotel room and he opened the door. A young man, casually dressed in blue jeans and shirt sleeves stood there smiling.

‘Are you the MEND leader?’ the author asked, surprised. The media images beamed out to the world by the local subsidiaries of the international news wires always depicts MEND fighters as muscular masked men, clutching Kalashnikovs and adopting belligerent postures, as though ready to fire at the slightest provocation.

‘But exactly what do you understand by MEND?’ he countered. ‘There is no such thing as MEND. What I do know is that there are armed youth in the creeks who say they have had enough of the oil companies’ double standards, and are determined to put to an end the exploitation of their people by Shell, Chevron and the Federal Government.’⁷

MEND is not an ‘organisation’ in the formal sense of the word. It is an idea, a general principle underlying the slew of communal, civic and youth movements that began to proliferate in the Niger Delta, and particularly in the Ijaw-speaking areas, in the wake of General Babangida’s failed adjustment policies in the late 1980s.

The country had been run by a succession of authoritarian and corrupt governments since the end of the civil war in 1970, the tragic apogee of which was the Babangida junta. The ensuing economic hardships, the government’s apparent inability to address this crisis,

⁷ Ike Okonta, Interview with Mr X (not real name), one of the leaders of MEND, Warri, 17th August 2006.

and its refusal to provide a civic and political framework in which oppressed citizens could air their grievances and seek remedy began to encourage a drift towards religious, ethnic, and irredentist organisations. The Ken Saro-Wiwa inspired Movement of the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP), which emerged in 1990, and the Ijaw National Congress, birthed in Port Harcourt a year later, have their genesis in this turbulent economic and political milieu.

These organisations pursued such civic goals as the end to military rule and the return of democratic civilian government, creation of new states in ethnic minority areas, and increase in their share of oil receipts. They utilised non-violent protest marches, advocacy in the mass media, petitions addressed to the government, and awareness-building seminars to press their case. However, as economic conditions worsened country-wide and election results were annulled by Babangida in mid 1993, a wave of anger and desperation began to spread among youth in such cities as Lagos, Kaduna, Kano, Enugu, Port Harcourt, Ibadan, Warri and Onitsha.

Militant youth organisations such as Odua Peoples Congress (OPC), Arewa Peoples Congress (APC) and Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) emerged in this period. These were communal organisations that drew their membership from the Yoruba, Hausa, and Igbo ethnic groups respectively. OPC and MASSOB wanted dissolution of the Federation, which they said should be replaced with new independent countries based in the various ethnic groups. APC, on the other hand, called for perpetuation of the status quo, but under Hausa political and military leadership. The youth militias began to arm. Clashes with the Nigerian military, and also between themselves, became a staple of Nigerian public life from 1994 onwards. General Sani Abacha had toppled the interim government Babangida had installed before he quit in November 1993, thrown Moshood Abiola, winner of the June 1993 presidential elections into jail, and unleashed a wave of terror targeted at journalists, democracy activists, and the youth militias challenging his right to rule.

Political developments in the Ijaw territory followed a slightly different trajectory. The group had not benefited from the various state creation exercises embarked upon by the government in the 1980s and early 1990s. The INC was at the forefront of the agitation to correct what it perceived as a 'gross injustice.' It argued that the Ijaw were deliberately dispersed in several coastal states where they constituted an oppressed minority, and that it was only fair that they be brought together in two or three homogenous states. Even so, it was not making any headway.

Skirmishes between Ijaw youth and the oil companies operating in the western delta had begun in the late 1980s, the former complaining that they had not been offered employment in the very industry on their door-step, and which, to make it worse, was destroying their rivers and farmlands. Ijaw elders and community leaders had mediated, and the process of this mediation gave birth to new youth-led civic groups. Prominent among these were Movement for the Survival of Ijaw Ethnic Nationality (MOSSIEND) and Movement for Reparations to Ogbia (MORETO). Ogbia is an Ijaw clan in the central delta, and from which Oronto Douglas hailed.

The creation of new local government councils in the Warri area by the government in 1997 provided the trigger for the militarization of youth groups in the area. Three prominent ethnic groups occupy Warri metropolis and its hinterland, extending into the creeks. The Itsekiri are perceived to be small but politically dominant. The other two are the Ijaw and Urhobo. There have been squabbles turning on ownership of land, and the rents to be derived there from, among all three groups since the 1920s. But these were usually peaceful affairs, fought out in the law courts.

But the lethal cocktail of economic deprivation, military dictatorship, and worsening environmental crisis in the western delta, reaching explosive heights in the 1990s ensured that when the next round of land tussles arrived, the entire city would go up in flames. This was exactly what happened in 1997 when the military governor announced the creation of a new local government council with headquarters in an Ijaw village, and then rescinded the decision the following day and moved it to an Itsekiri village. Ijaw youth accused Itsekiri elites of having pressured the government to relocate the seat of the new council to their area. The latter countered that the entire Warri territory belonged to the Itsekiri but that even so they had had no hand in the governor's decision. Youth from both groups quickly entered the fray. There was a stampede to arm on both sides. Events quickly degenerated into ethnic massacres and counter-massacres.

The proliferation of small arms in the Warri area inevitably fed into oil bunkering, an illicit activity which had been practiced in the high seas by powerful government officials in collaboration with oil workers for decades. Fringe elements in these militarised youth groups were to find 'work' here, helping the illegal oil barons to tap into pipelines to siphon crude oil and which was then taken to waiting ships. With the return of electoral politics in 1999, politicians in the Niger Delta also recruited from these armed elements to intimidate their political opponents and rig the vote. The oil companies also offered these youth 'protection work' in their facilities, arming them with lethal weapons in a cynical move to divide emergent and politically assertive youth organisations that were beginning to emerge. The Ijaw Youth Council (IYC), a new influential organisation founded by Orono Douglas, Asume Osuoka and others in 1998, had united youth all over Ijaw land in a peaceful but powerful opposition to the exploitative activities of the oil companies and the Federal Government in the region. The famous Kaiama Declaration, a document adopted by youth from several Ijaw clans and spelling out their grievances and how they might be addressed, was the brainchild of the IYC leadership.

It is important to note that it was a small minority that drifted into oil bunkering and protection 'services' for the corrupt politicians and oil companies. The overwhelming majority of Ijaw youth remained solidly under the control of the civic and communal organisations they themselves had founded, even after they had come under brutal attack from government soldiers in such towns as Kaima and Odi in 1998 and 1999. However, the IYC was to subsequently split into factions following a leadership crisis. Asari Dokubo, one its leaders, went on to establish the Niger Delta Peoples Volunteer Force (NDPVF), declaring that the peaceful methods of the IYC had not been effective and that what the new civilian government headed by President Obasanjo would heed was militant

action. Even so, the bulk of the remaining IYC members continued on the path of non-violent political action.

In the morning of 15 February 2006, government helicopter gun ships attacked the Ijaw village of Okerenkoko in the western delta. Okerenkoko is a part of Gbaramatu, an Ijaw clan in the western delta. Government officials alleged that Okerenkoko and neighbouring villages were the epicentre of the illegal oil bunkering activities President Obasanjo had resolved to stamp out, and that Federal troops had been instructed to ‘deal with’ the Ijaw youth participating in the activity. The gun ships returned again on 17th and 18th February, flattening houses and huts and killing several innocent people.⁸ Enraged youth all over Ijawland vowed revenge. It was this bloody incident that triggered the birth of the MEND militia.

⁸ See FNDIC, *Pathway to the Council*, handbook published by the FNDIC, July 2006. See also *Constitutionality of the Ijaw Struggle*, handbook published by the FNDIC, Warri, December 2005 for Oboko Bello’s version of events leading to the emergence of the Warri local government crisis of 1997. It is to be noted that Itsekiri leaders also have their own version of these events, diametrically opposed to Bello’s.

4. MEND AND ITS METHODS

Although the Okerenkoko attack provided the immediate impetus for the coalescing of several militant strains in the decades-old Ijaw struggle for self-determination into MEND, the movement can be said to have taken several years, dating from Isaac Boro's short-lived 'revolution' in February 1966, to finally come into its own.

The founding core of MEND's membership is derived from the Gbaramatu clan which was in the eye of the storm in the 1997 local government crisis, and then subsequently bore the brunt of the helicopter gun ship attack of February 2006. Even so, this thesis holds true only to the extent that MEND is viewed as a formal organisation with a clearly delineated membership structure and chain of command. But as already stated, MEND is not so much an 'organisation' but an idea in which many civic, communal, and political groups, each with its own local specificity and grievances, have bought into.

Resentment at the activities of the government and the oil companies run deep in all Ijaw clans in the eastern, central and western parts of the delta. An intricate maze of creeks links them all the way from Port Harcourt in the east to Warri in the West. The explosion of mobile telephony and internet services in Nigeria since 1999 has ensured that communication and coordination between armed units can be effected within minutes. These features are at the heart of the coalescing of disparate but united social concerns to birth MEND.

MEND's strength and military successes so far lie in four key factors:

It has successfully tapped into the fifty-year old Ijaw quest for social and environmental justice in the Niger Delta. There is no village in the Niger Delta where MEND sympathisers do not exist. Consequently, the movement operates in extremely friendly and cooperative terrain, able to mount lightning attacks and melt into the hamlets undetected.

Second, MEND is a loose coalition of armed militants, guided by a collegiate leadership, but which does not in any way constrain the ability of the various units to take their own decisions and mount military attacks independent of the others. The units plan their attacks separately, but are able to coordinate with other units in joint expeditions when necessary. Consequently they are active in all parts of the delta, adopting hit and run tactics and making it difficult for Federal troops to box them into a particular area and launch a massive attack.

Third, MEND militants fight in familiar territory, having fished and farmed in the maze of creeks, marshes, and mangrove swamps that constitutes the Niger Delta since childhood. The Nigerian army and Navy have superior hardware, but they often lose their way in the creeks when they mount attacks or give chase to the militants, rendering them impotent or worse, vulnerable to counter-attack. Several soldiers and naval ratings have lost their lives in this manner.

Fourth, MEND is an astute manipulator of the mass media, and has ensured that its case against the government and the oil companies has been clearly and eloquently made in newspapers and television networks in Nigeria and world-wide. Its case has been helped by the tragic events of 1990-1995 in the Ogoni area, during which period Shell officials worked actively with the Abacha junta to unleash mayhem and mass murder on the people, culminating in the hanging of Ken Saro-Wiwa and the Ogoni eight on 10 November 1995. Journalists and environmental activists in Nigeria, Western Europe and North America who participated in the Ogoni struggle have enthusiastically taken up MEND's case, even as they urge the militants to put down their guns and return to the path of peaceful dialogue pioneered by the IYC in 1998.

Hostages as weapon

MEND's weapon of choice is kidnapping of foreign oil workers. The calculation here is simple. The Nigerian government is notorious for its cavalier attitude when the lives of its citizens are at stake. But other countries, particularly the United States, France, United Kingdom and Italy which have massive oil installations their citizens operate in the Niger Delta usually cry out in loud protest when the latter are taken hostage. Foreign workers are thus the militants' favourite targets. MEND's most spectacular hostage taking was carried out at Shell's Forcados oil terminal in February 2006. Militants grabbed nine expatriate workers employed by Willbros, an oil engineering firm in contract to Shell, and spirited them away in a speedboat. Following several weeks of complex negotiations between the militants, Ijaw leaders, the Obasanjo government, the oil companies and the American and British governments, the last three of the hostages (several had been released previously) were set free on 27 March.⁹

It is significant that since MEND began to take hostages early in the year, none has been harmed. Government officials have sought to represent this aspect of MEND's activities as racketeering, claiming that the militants usually extort ransom from the hostages and the government before the former are released. While it is true that there are fringe elements in the Niger Delta who have embraced hostage-taking as a lucrative commercial venture, they are not to be confused with MEND militants. The objective of the latter is fundamentally political: focus the attention of Western governments and the world media on the Niger Delta when they grab these hostages, and exploiting the blaze of publicity thus generated, announce their grievances and demands on the Nigerian government.

It is, however, in attacks on Shell's facilities that MEND militias have displayed absolutely no restraint, an indication of their deep anger at the company's callous treatment of the Ijaw and the other ethnic groups in the Niger Delta since it began to produce oil in the region in 1956. Shell officials participated in military attacks on delta communities all through the 1980s into the new millennium. In my interview with several of the militants last August, they reeled off the names of the towns and villages that had tasted Shell's guns: Iko, Umuechem, Ogoni, Nembe, Kaima, Odi...It was a very long list.¹⁰ MEND's attack on the Forcados oil-loading platform was as audacious as it was

⁹ Associated Press, 'Nigerian Militants Release Last Hostages,' 27 March, 2006.

¹⁰ Ike Okonta, interview with Mr X and two other MEND militants, August 2006.

crippling. The oil company was forced to suspend production of 19 per cent of its daily production. The company's Cawthorne Channel flow station and Odidi II flow station were also destroyed. Pipelines all over the delta were blown apart, and Shell workers threatened with slow and painful death.

ChevronTexaco, Elf and ENI did not escape MEND's attention. Their facilities also came under attack, and their staff routinely abducted. At the height of MEND's military assaults in April, a quarter of Nigeria's oil production had been shut down, and Shell's giant off shore Bonga oil field, although protected by naval ships and gun boats, was also considered a potential MEND target. Dr Edmund Daukoru, a former Shell employee and since 2003 President Obasanjo's Minister in charge of petroleum, was so worried that he hurried to Washington D.C. to confer with Sam Bordman, the US energy secretary, on ways and means of taking the MEND 'problem' on hand.

In response to what they deemed to be an imminent invasion by special forces from the United States, MEND, Asari Dokubo's NDPVF and Martyrs Brigade and Coalition for Militant Action in the Niger Delta (CMND), two new groups that subsequently emerged to complement the formers' militant activities, announced the formation of a 'Joint Revolutionary Council' and pledged that they would deploy newly acquired heat-seeking rockets to attack and disable Shell's offshore Bonga Oil Field. Given that they had successfully attacked several offshore oil facilities in the past, this announcement triggered panic in the international market. Combined with already tight supplies elsewhere, particularly in the Middle East where oil production has significantly reduced in the volatile Iraq-Iran corridor, spot prices surged towards the roof, hitting \$72 per barrel.

MEND's press statements are not only calculated to create maximum panic in the international oil markets, it is also designed to leverage the concerns of the giant US and European financial companies that have invested heavily in Gulf of Guinea's burgeoning oil and gas industry, with the Niger Delta as its epicentre, to pile pressure on the Nigerian government. Leading the pack are Merrill Lynch, Societe Generale, Bank of America Securities, Credit Suissie First Boston, Morgan Stanley, UBS Investments, Goldman Sachs, J.P. Morgan, and Lehman Brothers. It is significant that these financial behemoths, who together have invested an estimated \$15 billion in the Nigerian oil and gas industry, held meetings with Nigerian government officials in November 2005 when confidential reports by American embassy officials in Abuja indicated that the Obasanjo government was speedily losing control of the delta to emergent youth militias.

MEND's shock tactics yielded dividends initially. Chevron and Shell officials had backed military attacks on local communities all through the 1990s, insisting that their business interests obliged them to offer logistical and financial support to Nigerian troops in their 'legitimate' effort to protect the delta oil fields from 'miscreants.' But as attacks on its facilities in the western delta accelerated in 2003-2004, resulting in the killing of company workers (three Nigerians and two Americans and their guards), shutting down 140,000 barrels of daily production, and hitting a peak in April 2006, Chevron executives in California began to rethink their martial policy, and subsequently made the

unprecedented statement that the company was not in support of military solutions in efforts to restore peace in the Niger Delta. They also quickly unfurled a 'new' Global Memorandum of Understanding, which they promised would tackle development problems in the impoverished communities with renewed vigour. Fred Nelson, head of Chevron's West Africa operations, told journalists in early June that 'brute force does not work in the long term. Our strategy is dialogue with the communities to solve their problems. If we can solve their problems the security issue will go away.'¹¹ MEND'S spokes persons claimed this new pacific posture as a victory.

The militia has also carefully positioned itself to derive maximum mileage from the activities of other militant groups, that although not as well-organised and politically coherent, nevertheless share similar grievances and regularly mount their own military attacks on oil company facilities and government troops. These fringe groups come by a bewildering array of names, and forge alliances and coalitions as quickly as they dissolve them. Prominent are South-South Liberation Movement (SSLM), Movement for the Sovereign State of the Niger Delta (MSSND), Niger Delta Vigilante, and Meninbutus, among others. Some of these groups shade into student cult groups that came into their own with the return of electoral politics in the late 1990s. Politicians in Rivers, Delta and Bayelsa state were quick to press them into service to leverage votes at gunpoint, a trend which subsequently spiralled into oil-bunkering 'services,' intimidation of fellow students in universities and other higher institutions all over the Niger Delta, and local community clashes in such areas as Ogoni, Okrika, and Kalabari.

MEND spokespersons regularly deplore the actions of these groups when they veer away from the explicitly political objective of advancing the cause of self-determination and equitable sharing of oil receipts, but are also quick to spring to their defence when soldiers and riot police attack them unjustly. On July 1, the MEND-led Joint Revolutionary Council issued an ultimatum to President Obasanjo to hand over to it the Rivers State Commissioner of Police for 'fair trial.' The Police had attacked and killed three Ijaw youth in Abonema town in the eastern delta who they subsequently claimed were cult members involved in raiding of commercial banks in Port Harcourt. MEND rejected this claim, insisting that the slain youth were Ijaw patriots who had 'fallen in the field of battle.' Four days after the expiration of the ultimatum, militants struck in the remote oil facility area of Sangana, and in a display of professionalism and bravado, abducted four naval officers.

MEND's military exploits have not dented the offensive capabilities of Nigeria's armed forces. But they have demoralised the troops, and also forced local journalists and other public commentators to begin to ask questions regarding the combat-readiness and overall effectiveness of the Army and Navy. Most importantly, MEND has transformed the image of the Ijaw, and indeed the entire local communities of the Niger Delta, from the hapless and quiescent victims popularised in the press, ever on the receiving end of atrocities deployed by the government and the oil companies, to an increasingly organised and assertive political bloc, able to hit back at its molesters.

¹¹ Nigeria Today, 'Chevron Against Use of force in the Niger Delta,' 12 May, 2006.

5. WORSE THAN IRAQ?

It is not yet clear whether the massacre at Letugbene on 20th August will turn out to be a crippling blow, compelling MEND militants to beat a retreat and explore peace alternatives with greater vigour. One fact is clear, though. Both the central government and the oil companies have retreated from their 'peace and dialogue' stance of last April when overtures were made to Ijaw youth and community leaders to come to Abuja and agree on a new 'Marshall Plan' for the Niger Delta. The new policy, although not favoured by some of President Obasanjo's senior commanders, is containment and subsequent evisceration of the youth militias through superior fire-power.

Shell led the 'return to the warpath' initiative when its officials secretly approached the US military in early March to see if it could intervene in the delta. Faced with MEND's increasingly focused attacks on its facilities, the company had shut down 455,000 barrels of daily crude output, evacuated the bulk of its staff, and declared *force majeure*. Company executives adopted two policies at the same time in this period, both designed to serve the same end of ensuring that Shell remained the top player in the delta. When Admiral Henry Ulrich, commander of the US Naval forces in Europe visited Nigeria last March, a delegation of oil company officials led by Shell asked him to deploy his ships to the region to 'protect our investments.'¹² At the same time company officials were briefing local journalists in Lagos and Abuja that they favoured dialogue with Ijaw youth as the only route to lasting peace in the restive region, a manoeuvre clearly designed to buy time while they readied their military option.

Admiral Ulrich turned down the request, explaining that 'it was difficult to conceive of a way that foreign forces could intervene because attacks on oil facilities and vessels were occurring very close to shore in territorial waters, or from the shore itself.'¹³ While maritime analysts at the US Office of Naval Intelligence in Fort Lauderdale openly acknowledge that the Nigerian government is no longer able to ensure security in the delta region, and that indeed oil production in the country will 'hang precariously in the balance for some time,' they have been careful to avoid giving the impression that increased US military presence in the Gulf of Guinea is a prelude to 'Vietnamisation' of West Africa's oil-rich belt.

Ulrich, on the occasion of a courtesy visit to Nigeria's chief of naval staff in Abuja on March 19 informed journalists that his government planned to increase its naval presence in the Gulf of Guinea for the sole purpose of ensuring maritime safety in the region. He explained that his primary concern was the proliferation of 'terrorist activities' in the region, and that he had deployed two ships with training and repair facilities to the Gulf of Guinea to assist West African navies in policing their shores more effectively.

The Gulf of Guinea, comprising fifteen west and central African countries, are critical to the United States' oil security. The region accounted for half of the nine million barrels per day produced by Africa in 2004. In the same year, the continent supplied an estimated

¹² Reuters, 'Nigerian oil "hangs in balance," 23 March, 2006.

¹³ See Reuters article.

18 per cent of US net oil imports, with Angola and Nigeria as the leading suppliers. This development has meant an increase in the number of ships and oil tankers that pass through the west coast of Africa on their way to America's east coast. Said Ulrich, 'In this day and age, all nations have a vested interest in knowing the ships that are coming into their waters, their territory and what they are carrying.'¹⁴

Right-wing American journalists and think-tanks, with the Washington-based Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in the lead, have also been playing up the 'surge in Islamic terrorist threat in the Gulf of Guinea' angle, arguing that with billions of dollars of US investment now in the region, thousands of US workers in the oil fields, and strategic supplies of energy at stake, US effort to boost the capability of these countries to repel attacks from Islamic terrorists of the bin Laden variety had become imperative.

Local journalists and environmental activists in Nigeria and other Gulf of Guinea countries have questioned the assertion that the region is crawling with Islamic terrorists, pointing out that neither the Bush government nor the right-wing think-tanks it is allied with have been able to produce compelling evidence to back up their claims when asked to do so. They have also expressed fears that the new ring of steel being put in place in their region by the US navy is an underhand attempt to militarise the region and encourage attacks on oil facilities by armed militias and then use this as justification for military occupation of the Gulf of Guinea.

Significantly, reference to 'another Vietnam' and 'the new Iraq' is now routine in the Niger delta creeks, and such talk is not restricted to armed militias like MEND. When rumours began to make the rounds in February, at the outset of MEND's offensive that the US government had resolved to send in the Marines to assist Nigerian troops in rescuing the nine expatriate workers they had kidnapped, there was a general uproar. Patrick Bigha, leader of the Warri Ijaw Peace Monitoring Group, a civic pressure group that espouses non-violent political action, quickly called a press conference in the city and declared that 'The Niger Delta is not Afghanistan or Iraq and any attempt to dare us will end in a bloodbath and the greatest defeat in the history of the American Army.'¹⁵

Such utterances is sweet music to American journalists like Jeffrey Taylor of the *Atlantic Monthly*, who, after travelling in the Niger Delta for a couple of days last March, wrote an article in the magazine making the controversial claim that Nigeria had become the largest failed state on earth, further threatened by takeover from radical Islamic forces. This, Taylor, argued, would endanger the region's abundant oil reserves that the US government had vowed it would protect, adding that 'should that day come, it would herald a military intervention far more massive than the Iraqi campaign.'¹⁶ The vultures of war have scented the Gulf of Guinea oil price, and are now circling overhead, egging on combatants on both sides, and readying their bellies for the inevitable feast of corpses at the end of battle.

¹⁴ George Oji, 'US to increase Naval Presence in Gulf of Guinea,' *ThisDay*, 20 March, 2006.

¹⁵ Segun James, 'Militants to US: Steer clear of Niger Delta,' *ThisDay*, Lagos, 24 February, 2006.

¹⁶ Jeffery Taylor, 'Worse than Iraq?' *Atlantic*, April, 2006.

The fear of triggering another Vietnam-like scenario is, however, furthest from the calculations of the Nigerian and US governments at present. US deployment of military hardware in the region continues apace. The US European Command has concluded plans to construct a naval base in Sao Tome and Principe, to complement the permanent military base in Djibouti, in the strategic Horn of Africa. On August 28 Nigerian and American officials in Abuja announced a new Nigeria-United States Gulf of Guinea Energy Security Initiative aimed at 'securing' \$600 billion of new investments in oil fields in the region.

Present estimates indicate that the gulf hosts some 14 billion barrels of crude in deep offshore fields. There are 33 fixed crude oil production platforms, 20 floating production facilities, and 13 floater and off-take vessels in the Gulf. This is expected to increase to 159 fixed platforms and 700 oil wells by 2008. Any military attack and subsequent disruption of production would not only threaten US and Western Europe's energy supplies, the loss of billions of dollars in investments could throw their economies into a tail-spin. The energy security initiative is the American response to this potential threat.

But is building a new infrastructure of state violence in the Gulf of Guinea an intelligent and effective answer to the fundamentally political questions that fifty years of uncontrolled oil exploitation, massive corruption, and cynical exploitation of the local communities have raised, now given militant expression by the MEND militia?

6. CONCLUSION: BRINGING THE CIVIC BACK IN

This author has been travelling in the Niger Delta's devastated communities extensively since the late 1980s, but nothing prepared him for what he encountered in Oporoza and its satellite hamlets in the Western delta last August. Poverty and neglect are the norm in the region, but in Oporoza, and further still in the clutch of creek hamlets that constitute the Ijaw clan of Egbema, they rise up in the shape of flimsy huts on decayed wooden stilts, bracken greenish water ponds from which the bedraggled inhabitants drink, and polluted fishing creeks long denuded of life, to smack you rudely in the face. To visit Oporoza and Egbema is to encounter the very nadir of the noxious embrace of Big Oil, unaccountable government, and the excruciating indigence that only violent exclusion from the civic sphere can bring about.

For as Amartya Sen has so brilliantly demonstrated in his book *Development as Freedom*, poverty and famine only flourish where people are deprived of the right to participate in the political and civic process to determine the way in which they desire to be governed. This is only too true of Oporoza and the wider Niger Delta where the machine guns of the Nigerian military, oiled by oil company executives, have violently elbowed ordinary people out of the public sphere.

Academics, journalists, and development workers that espouse the so-called 'Resource Curse' theory argue that resource-rich countries like Nigeria inevitably degenerate into authoritarian and corrupt rule because it is easy for the military elites and their civilian allies to hijack the oil fields by force and redesign political institutions to sustain the new regime of praetorian government.¹⁷ The junta, plentifully supplied with dollars from oil sales, does not bother to tax citizens to finance governance, thereby reducing them to powerless spectators unable to drive economic development or participate effectively in the political arena. Poverty, corruption in high places, and religious and ethnic violence are usually the result, the advocates of the resource curse theory argue.

But there is nothing inevitable about resource-rich regions regressing into poverty and remaining in the ditch of privation as the cases of oil-rich Norway and Canada today illustrate. Nor is it the case that all movements toward authoritarianism are driven by the lure of easy spoils. Nigerian politics was already well on the way to unaccountable government, driven by the leaders of the three powerful regions, before oil production commenced in 1956. This was largely the legacy of colonial conquest, and the undemocratic institutions of governance put in place by the British to exploit the wealth of the country undisturbed by the local people, subsequently handed over to carefully chosen political leaders who would go on to protect their interests after the colonial rulers quit in 1960. The Maxim machine gun, not the ballot box, was the instrument of rule in the Niger Delta and Nigeria in the age of colonialism.

¹⁷ Professor Jeffery Sachs, a Columbia University economist and UN Sec Gen Kofi Annan's adviser on Millennium Development Goals, developed the 'Resource Curse' theory to explain the seeming inability of resource-rich states in Africa and Latin America to industrialise and prosper like their counterparts in south-east Asia.

It matters when oil was discovered in a country – before or after its institutions of government and political representation have firmed up and able to serve as a countervailing force to would-be despots and carpet-baggers. Norway is prosperous because her institutions of accountability were well-established and self-propelling long before she struck oil. Nigeria is a basket case today because her people were still under unaccountable colonial rule when oil was discovered in the Niger Delta in 1956. The machine guns that slaughtered the innocents of Letugbene last August are directly descended from the Maxim guns that Frederick Lugard employed to ‘pacify’ the ‘natives’ at the behest of the Royal Niger Company at the turn of the twentieth century. Shell and crude oil may have replaced Taubman Goldie and his thirst for palm oil, but the marriage of egregious violence and the resources of local people remain undisturbed, a potent link which in the specific case of oil, is illuminated by Prof. Michael Watt’s ‘petrovioleence’ thesis.¹⁸

It is telling that top on the list of the grievances that the MEND militia pointed to in its negotiations with government officials last March was the exclusion of the Ijaw from meaning political participation in the Nigerian project following the return of electoral politics in 1999. Anxious to arrange a ceasefire so oil production could resume, a delegation comprising two Shell executives and Timi Alaibe, finance director of the government-controlled Niger Delta Development Commission, visited MEND’s ‘Council of Elders’ in Camp Five, a fortified island near Oporoza where they were ensconced in early June. The MEND spokesperson argued that discussions must go beyond ‘mere provision of electricity and water’ and focus on the political marginalisation of the Ijaw because, according to him, ‘we believe that we have to seek first our political freedom and every other thing will follow.’¹⁹

Oboko Bello had earlier framed these grievances in the handbook *Constitutionality of the Ijaw Struggle* thus: ‘The Ijaw of Warri, hitherto denied liberty, political space, and peace have been continuously robbed of equal participation in democracy and good governance of the Federation at the local, state and central governments...These entities corruptly control oil and gas resources which exploration has had devastating impact on the Ijaw people and their environment.’²⁰ Significantly, Oronto Douglas, the Ijaw lawyer and environmental campaigner, put these political issues in the forefront of the list of demands he and other Ijaw leaders presented to their fellow delegates when they participated in the constitutional dialogue President Obasanjo convened in Abuja in 2005.

We have it on the authority of the Atlanta-based Carter Centre that local and presidential elections were massively rigged in the states comprising the Niger Delta in 1999, following the return of the armed forces to the barracks. Former President Jimmy Carter and his wife Rosalyn travelled to the region to monitor the elections and reported:

¹⁸ Michael Watts, *Petro-Violence: Some Thoughts on Community, Extraction and Political Ecology*, Berkeley Workshop on Environmental Politics, Institute of International Studies, University of California, Berkeley, September 1999.

¹⁹ See ‘A Trip to Mend Headquarters,’ *The Ijaw Voice*, July 2006.

²⁰ See *Constitutionality of the Ijaw Struggle*, preface.

‘Serious problems were observed in the National Assembly elections of February 20, partially caused by low voter turn out and the unknown status of many candidates who had been nominated by the political parties. Some ballot boxes were stuffed, election officials bribed, and the final results incorrectly tabulated. In addition to our normal reports, I wrote personal letters to the presidential candidates asking them to urge their supporters to refrain from improprieties during the presidential election.’²¹

Carter’s well-meaning entreaty was ignored, and the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) proceeded to rig the presidential election in March 1999 and install Olusegun Obasanjo president. The PDP also rigged the vote four years later, and returned Obasanjo and all the PDP governors to office. In Bayelsa State in particular, Shell and ENI executives provided cash and logistics to ensure that the local and governorship elections went the way of their favoured candidates in 2003. In the Niger Delta, several influential politicians and community leaders who spoke out against this massive disenfranchisement of the local people were set-upon by government-sponsored thugs and murdered.

Prominent members of such civic groups as the Ijaw Youth Council were lured with promises of cash and government contracts and made to work for the governors of the various Niger Delta states as enforcers and thugs. Indeed, the metamorphosis of political activism in the delta region from non-violent advocacy to armed insurrection is partly explained by the deliberate infiltration of their ranks by government agents, thereby restricting the civic options of those who refused to be co-opted. In desperation, elements of the latter group embraced the AK47 to seek redress.

The venality and corruption displayed by the governors of the delta states following the return of electoral politics in 1999 is driven by the fact that they rigged themselves into office with the support of powerful patrons in Abuja, and now loot local treasuries at the behest of the latter. Such government development initiatives as OMPADEC (1993), NNDC (1999) and latterly Council on Socio-economic Development of Coastal States in the Niger Delta (COSEDECS) April 2006, ostensibly designed to address long-standing poverty and social neglect in the region, have also been transformed into avenues to dispense perks and favours to the friends and relatives of the PDP leadership in the capital.

Authoritarian in conception and commandist in execution, these projects, including the bewildering array of ‘community development projects’ run by the oil companies, although well-meaning, have not been able embed in a politically marginalised people. Nor have they been able to deliver jobs, social amenities and peace – the so-called ‘dividends of democracy’ that President Obasanjo promised the people of the region when he took power in May 1999. Anna Zalik, the Canadian scholar and rights activist, has drawn our attention to the problematic of development strategies devoid of democratic and participatory structures in oil-bearing communities in the region.²²

²¹ Jimmy Carter, ‘Visit to Nigeria,’ The Carter Center, Atlanta, 25 February, 1999.

²² See Anna Zalik, ‘The Niger Delta: “Petro-violence” and “Partnership Development”’, *Review of African Political Economy*, 2004.

Those who sneer at youth activists in the Niger Delta today and claim that the return of politics has only transformed them into younger versions of the corrupt military leaders they battled against in the 1990s fail to distinguish between fraudulent elections, which put the present crop of political 'leaders' in the region in power in 1999, and proper electoral processes that, had they taken place, would have put the true representatives of the local people in positions of government and authority. At the heart of the Niger Delta crisis, and which has now ballooned into armed insurgency, is the democracy deficit.

MEND, properly understood, is the violent child of the deliberate and long-running constriction of the public space in the Niger Delta in which ordinary citizens, now reduced to penurious subjects, can exercise their civil and political rights in the legitimate pursuit of material and social wellbeing. Behind the mask of the MEND militant is a political subject forced to pick up an AK47 to restore his rights as a citizen.

The journey to peace and prosperity in the region can only commence when the civic is brought back in.