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THE BURDEN OF OIL

**Social Deprivation and Political Militancy
in Gbaramatu Clan, Warri South West LGA
Delta State, Nigeria**

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THE BURDEN OF OIL: SOCIAL DEPRIVATION AND POLITICAL MILITANCY IN GBARAMATU CLAN, WARRI SOUTH WEST LGA, DELTA STATE, NIGERIA

Elias Courson¹

Let us examine with some latitude whether the state of development is to any extent commensurate with a tint of the bulk of the already tapped mineral and agricultural resources.....Therefore, remember your seventy-year-old grandmother who still farms before she eats; remember also your poverty stricken people; remember too your petroleum which is being pumped out daily from your veins, and then fight for your freedom².

- Isaac Adaka Boro

History is a notoriously slippery creature. Governments may mould it to fit official purposes, historians' reinterpret it to give it a new life and human memory may distort it when the truth is too painful. And so it has been of Warri³.

- J.O.S Ayomike

INTRODUCTION

The state of crisis in the Gbaramatu territory to the south-west of Warri, Delta State is dire and escalating. Since 1997, this oil-rich territory of Warri has been embroiled in political violence. The decade old crisis has claimed many lives and rendered more than 30,000 homeless (including internally displaced persons). The subsequent loss of revenue to the Federal Government and the derivation to the oil producing states of Nigeria has totaled billions of dollars. Since early 2006, attacks on oil

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² See Tony Tebekaemi (ed.), *The Twelve-Day Revolution*, Benin-City: Umeh Publishers, 1982, pp., 64, 116 & 117

³ J.O.S Ayomike, *The Ijaw in Warri: A Study In Ethnography*, Benini-City: Mayomi Publishers, 1990, p., ix. Ayomike in his historical analysis says the Gbaramatu people migrated to their present abode from Gbaraun, however, the precise time of arrival and who settled first in Warri is the point of dispute.

facilities and the abduction of foreign oil workers by militants, has shut in the nation's daily oil production by 1/6 to 2.6 million bpd (barrels per day). This crisis is the direct consequence of endemic poverty in the oil-bearing communities of the delta, lack of socio-economic development, militarization of the oil-bearing communities, lack of stake/participation in the oil industry by oil-bearing communities, high unemployment, corruption and lack of democratic governance in the Niger Delta and Nigeria.

At the root of these agitations in Gbaramatu is the quest for a measure of political autonomy and self-governance – and by extension the rectification of historical wrongs including the loss of substantial oil revenues. The need to have a LGA (Local Government Area) or more electoral zones to serve as legitimate/constitutional means of benefiting from the resources taken from their soil by way of derivation is at the center of these conflicts. Thus, the Delta State Independent Electoral Commission's (DINEC) district/zone delineation embarked upon in 2004, was rejected by the voters and INEC due to purported irregularities. However, the clamor for the creation of a LGA or more zones by the people of Gbaramatu has not yet been realized. The ongoing MEND (Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta) crisis, originating in this area of the Niger Delta in January of 2006, is viewed by many as a response to the lack of political will by the federal and state governments to properly and rightly address this political problem. Major General Tamuno of MEND alluded to this when he stated, "the people are looking for their fair share of the proceeds. They feel disenfranchised, they feel left out of the political pie and this is their way of making a statement"⁴. In this way, the MEND phenomenon can be seen as a targeting of the government by impoverished, disenfranchised people who are not given the attention and recognition as the rightful owners of oil. The oil companies, being the only visible government presence in this territory, are targeted only to draw government's attention. The events in Gbaramatu since February 2006 to date (such as the current problem of who should fly the PDP flag for Delta State governor's election and other political positions) cannot be totally disconnected from the people's struggle for self-rule which deepened (though it did not begin) in 1997. Until this political logjam is resolved, peace in this territory may be little more than a 'fleeting illusion'.

GBARAMATU: A BRIEF HISTORICAL RETROSPECTIVE

Gbaramatu is an Izon Clan in the western delta fringe of Nigeria. The Clan with a population of over 65,000 people is made up of more than fifty communities with Oporoza acknowledged as the headquarters and ancestral home of the Clan/kingdom⁵. The Gbaramatu people of Warri have been neighbors to the Itsekiris at the west, the Ogulagha Izens and Forcados to the south, and the Ekeremor in Bayelsa to their east; the Urhobos of Effurun are sited to their north. Most of the Gbaramatu communities,

⁴ *The Guardian*, Lagos, February 9, 2007

⁵ E.J. Alagoa, *A History of the Niger Delta*, Port Harcourt: Onyoma Research Publications, 2005, p. 46. This view was also expressed in my oral interview in October, 2006 with Chiefs (Dr.) W.O Okirika, J.G. Ari and A.M Bubo (JP). Chief Okirika is the Bolouwei (Traditional Prime Minister), Chief Ari, Puwei (Chief Scribe) and Chief A.M Bubo is the Fiyewei (Spokesperson) of the Gbaramatu Clan

villages and hamlets are distributed along the salty Escravos River and the adjoining brackish fresh water creeks of western delta⁶.

The historical genealogy of the people is quite complex and a topic of substantial scholarly dispute. In one account, the clan is said to have been founded by Ijo⁷. He is believed to have migrated from the northwest (probably from the Mali and Songhai empires of old) through Upper Egypt, Nupe and to have briefly settled at Ile-Ife with Oduduwa⁸. He thereafter left Ile-Ife, with a retinue of his kinsmen and moved southwards to Bini, some of whom settled there. He, along with others however, continued the journey through the rivers until they reached Oporoza along the Escravos River⁹. This migration is said to have taken place between 1100AD and 1200AD. All other Izon communities and clans in Bayelsa, Delta, Edo, Ondo and even the Urhobos of Effurun are believed to be people who later departed from Oporoza.

Conversely, another account presented by Alagoa suggests that progenitors of the Izon clans of Arogbo, Kabo, Kumbowei, Gbaran and Effurun in western delta migrated from the community called Gbaraun, which is currently located in the Southern-Ijaw LGA, Bayelsa State¹⁰. He however recognized that the historical record was in dispute;

The conflict in recorded traditions center around two main points, first the kinship relationship between the various ancestors; and second, the direction of migration¹¹.

Gbaramatu is, as previously mentioned, made up of several communities, villages and hamlets. However, Oporoza the ancestral home of these settlements is regarded by all as the Clan's headquarter and center of socio-cultural activities. Some of the other communities include (but are not limited to) the following: Kunukunuma, Kokodiagbene, Binikururu, Aja-ama, Goba, Inikorogha, Opuede, and Okerenkoko¹². Others are, Kurutie, Kantu, Okpele-ama, Makaraba, Tejuboh, Ubafan, Utunana, Opuedebubor, Kenghagbene, Bibopre-Zion, Jones Creek, Egwa, Seitorubebe, Pepe-ama, Olukperebu, Abiteye, Ekpemu, Adakagbene, Otungbo, Oburukirengban, Dabriye, Dounimighan, and Malagbene. Of the over fifty communities in the clan only nine are officially gazetted by

⁶ E.J. Alagoa, *Ibid*.

⁷ Ijo is the progenitor of the Izon race, and means truth. The name could be written as Ijo, Izon and anglicized as Ijaw. This account, I think, is due to literal interpretation of the Izon word 'Gbaramatu' (Gbaraun-Amatu), which means the root, origin, base, source, foundation or inhabitants of Gbaraun

⁸ Oduduwa is believed to be the progenitor of the Yoruba race who inhabit Western Nigeria.

⁹ This account is contained in a "Brief Historical Origin of Gbaramatu Clan (Kingdom)", a five-paged document by the Gbaramatu Traditional Council, Oporoza. The document is signed by Chief W.O. Okirika and Chief J.G. Ari, Prime Minister and Scribe respectively.

¹⁰ E.J. Alagoa, *A History of the Niger Delta*, pp., 46-47. Alagoa in his oral historical findings in the Western Delta Izon Clans in the 60s discovered that Izon communities in the western delta fringe are occupied by earlier migrants from Gbaraun.

¹¹ E.J. Alagoa, *Ibid*.

¹² Okerenkoko is perceived in military circles as the strong hold of the MEND militants in western delta. The community has experienced several military invasions from 2003 to date due to this real or imagined perception even by some in the civil populace.

the government, they are; Oporoza, Kunukunuma, Kokodiagbene, Binikurukuru, Ajama(Azama), Goba, Inikorogha, and Okerenkoko¹³.

The traditional Kingship (Pereship) stool rotates amongst eight of these gazetted communities with Okerenkoko. The ninth assumes the traditional responsibility of crowning whoever is selected and confirmed by the Pere-Sele-Abu (King-makers). The role played by Okerenkoko (the crowning of the new king) is considered very vital in view of the fact that a person so chosen could only be crowned by representative(s) of Okerenkoko as custom demands. Some prerequisite conditions that must be met by an aspirant Pere (king) are that he must¹⁴;

- I. be a free born of the clan
- I. be of the paternal lineage of one of the ruling houses (communities)
- I. be a strong and courageous male adult of outstanding character
- I. have no criminal record
- I. be tall and well-built
- I. be literate

In fulfillment of these conditions and after undergoing the necessary traditional rites of passage, the candidate is presented to a general assembly (Ibe-Gboloi) of the clan in Oporoza by the Okorenkoko representative(s), who will in turn crown and pronounce him Pere (King) of the Clan¹⁵.

However, after the reign of Pere Ukpuluko I from 1913-1924 there was a long interregnum. For about 50 years there was no king was installed in Gbaramatu as a consequence of British Colonial rule in the territory and the attendant crisis that stemmed from it. It was emphasized by the Gbaramatu Council of Chiefs that:

Owing to the fact that the Pere never wanted to be subordinated to the colonial administrators, they [the kings] refused to compromise their positions. Therefore, it was very difficult for the British Colonial Administrators to effectively administer this area and other areas with a properly constituted traditional authority. There were a lot of resistance which snowballed into several crisis between the Colonial administrators and the Peres. However, in order to stamp there authority in these places, the British decided to abolish traditional rulership and replaced them (the Peres) with their own appointed

¹³ This view and information was given to me by Chief Ari during my interview with him on October 12, 2006.

¹⁴ Only men can become Pere (king). Women cannot occupy the position even though they are members and participate in some community affairs. Most traditional affairs are performed by the male/men, though women are seen as mothers and respected in Izon culture/custom.

¹⁵ The King is addressed as Pere (king), and if installed cannot be punished or removed from office except sent on exile if found wanting in the discharge of his duties and responsibilities; on return from exile he will be made to undergo seven-day sacrifice to appease the ancestors, also during this period of sacrifice no woman is allowed to move freely in Gbaramatu clan.

persons who will be loyal to the British Administration after the amalgamation of the southern and northern protectorates in 1914 by Lord Lugard¹⁶.

A LIST OF GBARAMATU PERES (KINGS) BETWEEN 1372-1924

S/NO	TITLE	NAME OF OCCUPANT	PERIOD	YEARS
1	PERE GBARAUNWEI I	GBARAWEI IZO	1372 – 1421	49 YRS
2	PERE OPOROZAWEI I	OPOROZA GBARAWEI	1421 – 1426	22
3	PERE OPOROZAWEI II	FIEBAI OPOROZA	1426 – 1468	42
4	PERE OGEI I	EGELOU OGEI	1468 – 1495	27
5	PERE IKIRENTIMI I	SEI IKIRENTIMI	1495 – 1560	65
6	PERE OBORO I	BURUN OBORO	1560 – 1590	30
7	PERE EBIABU I	EBIOWEI ARUGU	1590 – 1627	37
8	PERE ARUGU I	VEKEDAUGEREGHA	1627 – 1652	25
9	PERE DAUGEREGHA I	EBIABO OFOMINI	1652 – 1670	18
10	PERE DEIN-OWEI I	AGIDI DEIN-OWEI	1670 – 1689	19
11	PERE UGBORUGBO I	EBIME UGBORUGBO	1689 – 1711	22
12	PERE SAISAI I	EKIRI SAISAI	1711 – 1728	17
13	PERE TOMITIBE I	EBILADE TOMITIBE	1728 – 1739	11
14	PERE OGBEYAMA I	AMAKUBU OGBEYAMA	1739 – 1760	21
15	PERE USAKU I	SUARU USAKU	1760 – 1761	1
16	PERE USAKU II	BOJO USAKU	1761 – 1800	39
17	PERE FIEOWEI I	BRABAI FIEOWEI	1800 – 1825	25
18	PERE ETIBO I	IKIYAN ETIBO	1825 – 1848	23
19	PERE KENEBRA I	OFINI EGE KENEBRA	1848 – 1861	13
20	PERE AGBO I	OFOMINI AGBO	1861 – 1872	11
21	PERE GBAZO I	EBENE GBAZO	1872 – 1892	20
22	PERE EKPESIN I	FURUH EKPESIN	1892 – 1913	21
23	PERE UKPOLUKPO I	TANGA UKPOLUKPO	1913 – 1924	11

Crucially, in Gbaramatu clan while Pere Tanga Ukpulupo I, resisted the British Colonial powers over his territory, Chief Uwenegha (Wenegha) was appointed a Warrant Chief in 1918 as a representative of the British Colonial state. The British continue to exercise control and domination over the territory, making the traditional institutions of customary rule largely irrelevant. Some others individuals were appointed as Warrant Chiefs by the colonialists include; Chief Oluba (1924), Chief Ogelegbanwei (1925), Chief Osokiri “Sokiri” (1925), Chief Okirika “Okrika” (1925), and Chief Osiboge “Siboge” (1925)¹⁷. While the Warrant Chief system was in effect dissolved as such in 1929, the power, influence and authority of warrant Chiefs dwindled. In the postcolonial period the customary system of local rule was revived and reconstituted and existed as a parallel system of government to local and state forms of rule. . The Gbaramatu clan therefore, like many others kingdoms in Nigeria, revisited the stool of Pereship

¹⁶ This quote is contained in the five-paged document “Brief History of Gbaramatu Clan (kingdom)” from the Gbaramatu Council of Chiefs, Oporoza. This scenario was played and replayed by the invading European traders and the colonial British rulers to William Koko of Nembe, Jaja of Opobo, Nana of Itsekiri and even in Lagos. Some of these kings were not only removed but banished and deported to foreign lands due to their “stubborn” or insistence in the communal governance structure as opposed to Warrant Chiefs arrangement. Some were also not ready to play the second fiddle game.

¹⁷ This information is contained in the five-paged document. The tenure of a warrant Chief is dependent on the degree of loyalty, cooperation and determined by the Colonial master, hence; any Warrant Chief perceived not to be loyal is removed without prior notice.

(Kingship) and consequently installed Zai Tiemo as Gbaraun II in 1976. While Zai Teimo died in 2000 (he ruled Gbaramatu for 26 years), no Pere (King) has yet been installed in the clan. Currently a regent, Chief Wolo Ukulo, represents the clan until a Pere is installed.

Before the human 'commodification' of slaves and British colonial rule in Nigeria, Gbaramatu was said to be a prosperous Western Izon clan whose aborigines bravely battled the turbulent and scary tidal wave of the Atlantic in order to make a living out of fishing, canoe carving, salt-making and farming¹⁸. The Gbaramatu clan's act of trade with their delta neighbors and hinterland of Nigeria is evidenced in a set of six little bronze pieces discovered in the forest of Oporoza¹⁹. The evolution of the Atlantic human trade and British Colonial rule in Nigeria are crucial to understanding the importance of current dynamics of the western delta fringe of Gbaramatu. The first sets of slaves were inhabitants of the coastal delta communities that were forcefully captured by the Portuguese in 1440 or thereabout²⁰. When the market for slaves increased and the coast could not meet the demand from Europe and North America, the hinterland became centrally affected. The coastal communities like Gbaramatu, Opobo, and Nembe were still nodal points for the slave trade. It is believed that the "presence of huge canon and a big ship's anchor at the first site of Oporoza provides further concrete evidence of Gbaramatu participation in the overseas trade"²¹. For instance, Pere Sei Ikirentimi I, ruling Gbaramatu from 1495-1560, was acknowledged by the Council of Chiefs as a 'warlord' who captured many slaves from the hinterland and traded directly with Portuguese merchants. As a consequence of both the slave trade and the subsequent palm oil trade, the entire Niger delta was heavily impacted and the internal governance structures and institutions in most coastal communities were irrevocably altered. Commodities such as firearms and gunpowder exchanged for slaves became what Oronto Douglas described as "weapons of communal destruction." Hence, the political, social, economic and cultural life of a flourishing Gbaramatu Izon clan was radically transformed.

WHO OWNS WARRI?

Warri city and environs consists of three LGAs (Warri North, Warri South and Warri South-West) with the government structure dominated by Itsekiri ethnic group. It is the most populous and significant city in Delta state, Nigeria and the heart of the

¹⁸ The farming undertaken at this period according to Chief A.M Bubo was not a large-scale stuff, but subsistence unlike the other trades mentioned. Gbaramatu clan at the pre-slavery and pre-colonial era was said to have been the main source of fish that sustained Warri, its environ and beyond (hinterland), they also make salt from seawater and mangrove roots (Alagoa, 2005.).

¹⁹ E.J Alagoa, *Ibid*. For Alagoa the presence of these bronzes (the pieces at Oporoza are now used mainly for masquerade headpieces) provides evidence of trade or contacts with bronze cultures in other parts of Nigeria, because either the finished bronzes, or at least the raw materials, must have been traded from elsewhere.

²⁰ "Atlantic Slave Trade", *Encarta online Encyclopedia* 2006, <http://encarta.msn.com> (downloaded on November 2, 2006).

²¹ E.J Alagoa, *A History of the Niger Delta*, p., 49.

western oil industry. Delta state was created in 1991 by the administration of former military dictator, General Ibrahim Babangida. Immediately the state was created and Asaba was pronounced as headquarters of the new Delta state²². Delta state produces about 20% of Nigeria's total oil output estimated at about 2.6 million bpd. Warri is one of the most important oil cities of Nigeria - second only to Port Harcourt²³. The city of Warri is inhabited by the Itsekiris, Urhobos and Itons with other minority groups such as the Isokos and Ndokwas.. In any case, the crisis in Warri over land ownership that has turned extremely violent includes the Itsekiris, Urhobos and Itons of Warri. These nationalities have been in violent conflict for years, destroying property and villages for control and ownership over Warri.

'Who Owns Warri?'²⁴

The question of who owns Warri is a multifaceted and recurring problem. This multidimensional issue as discussed in Onoawarie's paper(2000), is not only unresolved to date but at the root of all crisis affecting Warri city and its surrounding areas. On its face a similar question - "*who owns San Francisco?*" - when posed to students of the University of California, Berkeley, USA, was not only considered meaningless, but ambiguous and irrelevant²⁵. In the Nigerian context, the resolution of the question lies in 'original settlers'/immigrant settlers' dichotomy, i.e., the 'original' inhabitants (first settlers/owners) and strangers (immigrants who came later without regard to how long such immigrants/strangers have spent in such territory). This is the fundamental disagreement in Warri; who came and settled first before other 'nationalities': Is it the Itsekiris, Urhobos or Itons?

In an attempt to answer this question bordering on the ownership of Warri, historians, ethnographers, academics and even professionals have failed to proffer answers acceptable to the three ethnic nationalities (Itsekiri, Urhobo and Iton) of Warri who all claim ownership. Such writers have been (often justifiably) accused of parochialism, ethnic biases, and ethnic sentiment. The more you dig into historical and other works on the ownership of Warri, as an objective and neutral researcher, the

²² Asaba is the home town of Maryam Babangida (the then President's wife), though Warri was more strategic and considered in most circles as a better option compared to Asaba. In any case, Warri continues to take the center stage of events in Delta state, with Asaba considered merely an administrative headquarters of the state. Most businesses and oil activities associated with the state are concentrated in Warri city and its surroundings.

²³ The bulk of oil produced in Delta state are derived from Warri and its environ. This is also the centre of all oil and land ownership related crisis in Delta state, maybe, due to royalty paid to landlords.

²⁴ Onoawarie Edebie, 'Who Owns Warri? The Politics of Ethnic Rivalry in the Western Niger Delta Region of Nigeria'. This paper was delivered at the First Annual Meeting and Conference of Urhobo Historical Society, held in Niagara Falls, Ontario, Canada (November 3-5, 2000), downloaded from <http://www.waado.UrhoboHistory/Warri/NigerDelta.html>.

²⁵ This question was posed to students at the Department of Geography, University of California, Berkeley, to see what their response would be. The students on further analysis resolved that the question could mean: (a) who are the eligible registered voters in San Francisco? (b) Who are the residents of San Francisco with property? (c) Which party controls San Francisco? None of the students answered the question in the direction of settlers/immigrants divide or original owners and strangers dichotomy.

more confused and magnified your hypothesis appears. The question of ownership has turned violent over the years among these three ethnic nationalities of Warri. For instance, the Izons and Urhobos fought over land ownership in Aladja (this is the site of the gigantic steel company in Nigeria), Gbarigilo and Esama in 1996; the Izons and Itsekiris fought a deadly war in 1997, 1998 and 1999, and Urhobos and Itsekiris in 1999²⁶.

The combination of inconclusive, ambiguous and undocumented histories of settlement and rule (combined with many distortions and fabrications of actual history), combined with the complex changes associated with several centuries of deepening European involvement and finally colonial rule, has produced a situation that is largely intractable at the level of historical consensus. The complexity and confusion turns on two issues. First, the political salience of 'indigeneity' in Nigerian politics. At Independence the granting of citizenship rights was matched by the preservation of customary forms of rule predicated on the notion of indigenous groups – and this principle has been enshrined in the constitution. As a consequence indigeneity can be – indeed always is – deployed as a basis for political claims making. The second issue is that who is seen as an indigene (which implies the hegemony of particular systems of chiefly and territorial rule) has direct implications for the politics of territory (who can establish a state, an LGA or an electoral ward) and for the control over oil bearing lands. Controlling Warri is thus about the ways in which indigenous groups can claim access to land rights (and hence oil rents) and to political institutions (local governments) which can then rights to the revenue allocation process. Owning Warri is thus a fierce competition for gaining access to oil rents.

In efforts to resolve this crisis, the question of “who owns Warri?” has overwhelmed legal avenues seeking out viable solutions. The various legal decisions are not obeyed, either because such legal rulings are not enforceable or based on disputed colonial relics²⁷. Underlining this question that has defied all historical and legal efforts are political and economic interests of the various ethnic nationalities. Also, the lack of political will on the part of Nigerian leaders to address this many headed hydra of a problem in order to forestall further killings, destruction of property and sometimes complete sacking of communities by the Itsekiris, Urhobos and Izons is a contributing factor. The city of Warri was ranked the most dangerous in Nigeria in the year 2003 by the September 1, 2003 edition of *Tell Magazine*, a Nigeria weekly magazine, due to incessant crisis witnessed during this period among these three ethnic nationalities of

²⁶ The 1997 crisis between Izon and Itsekiri was over location and relocation of LGA headquarters. The crisis is yet to be resolved to date and is considered part of the grievances of MEND and other armed groups in Western Niger Delta. The fight between the Itsekiris and Urhobos (1999) was also over land ownership in the city of Warri.

²⁷ To enforce such judgment is to evacuate the nationality termed immigrants to their original home, which will be Nigeria or somewhere else, and in that case is to say they are Nigerians or not. Then the question that will come to mind is: to where do you evacuate them? Also to say they are immigrants is to provide an acceptable alternative of where they come from and relocate them, will that be accepted?

Warri. There are however, four undisputed assertions deduced from the various literatures on Warri, Western Niger Delta, Niger Delta and Nigeria²⁸. They are:

- That the three ethnic nationalities (Itsekiri, Urhobo and Izon) have all lived in Warri for hundreds of years
- That the three ethnic nationalities (Itsekiri, Urhobo and Izon) of Warri have no any other place to call a 'home', except their present abode
- That all the three ethnic groups (Itsekiri, Urhobo and Izon) of Warri claim to be original settlers, i.e., indigenous
- That the title 'Olu of Warri' is not original (it was a product of colonial intervention) since the original title was 'Olu of Itsekiri'

In the context of oil and the contested cultural and political histories of the trio of ethnicities, these four assertions have proven to be politically highly combustible.

GBARAMATU CLAN: OIL AND THE 'DEMOCRATISATION OF VIOLENCE'²⁹

The Urhobo, Itsekiri and Izon of Warri have been living a closely together over many years: they stayed together, celebrated together, intermarried and had each other's blood³⁰. But with the emergence of government and oil companies paying of royalties to landlords, people began to see ownership of land as an important factor for the 'primitive' accumulation of wealth. Indigenes strongly self identified as Urhobos, Itsekiris and Izens (the emergence of ethnic affiliation). The change of the title of 'Olu of Itsekiri' to 'Olu of Warri' worsened the situation of things. Itsekiri became synonymous with Warri, with the Olu and with claiming ownership of the city of Warri to the detriment of the Urhobos and Izens. The Izon and Urhobo have resisted the domination by the Itsekiris since inception, and have vowed to resist it to its logical end³¹.

Gbaramatu clan is a major oil producing territory in Warri South-West LGA, Delta state. The current crisis in Gbaramatu, which is replicated in most oil producing communities of the delta of Nigeria, is traceable to colonial and neo-colonial fabrications

²⁸See also T.E.A Salubi's protest letter to the Western Government of Nigeria in 1952 on the change of title from 'Olu of Warri' to 'Olu of Itsekiri' and the Ownership of Warri. Salubi's letter which is quite informative is available on the Urhobo Historical Society's website, www.waadoo.org. The literatures include and not limited to the following: J.O.S, Ayomike, *The Ijaw of Warri: A Study in Ethnography*, Benin City: Mayomi Press, 1990, J.O.S Ayomike, *A History of Warri*, Benin City: Ilupeju Press Ltd, 1998, J.O.E Sagay, *The Warri Kingdom*, Sapele: Progress Publishers, E.J. Alagoa, *A History of the Niger Delta*, PortHarcourt: Onyoma Research Publications, 1972, E.J Alagoa(ed), *The land and People of Bayelsa State: Central Niger Delta*, Port Harcourt: Onyoma Research Publications, 1999, William Moore, *History of Itsekiri*, London: Frank Cass & Co. Ltd, 1970, Michael Crowder, *Colonial West Africa*, London: Frank Cass & Co. Ltd, 1978, Sir Alan Burns, *History of Nigeria*, London: Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1969, John Hach, *Nigeria*, London: HEB Ltd, 1971, William Greary, *Nigeria Under British Rule*, London: Frank Cass & Co. Ltd, 1965.

²⁹ Peterside Sofiri of the Centre for Advanced Social Sciences (CASS), Port Harcourt, Rivers state describes the proliferation of arms and the attendant violence in the Niger Delta by the ruling political elites and political office seekers in the Niger Delta as the 'democratization of violence'.

³⁰ Chief E.K Clark in an interview in the 'Tell News magazine', Lagos, September 1, 2003.

³¹ The 'Tell News- Magazine', Lagos, September 1, 2003.

and legacies. The various treaties signed, are today used as the basis for legal rulings and political decision-making³² and as part of a ferocious, life and death, struggle over oil revenues and the revenue allocation process.

The Niger Delta which is home to substantial oil and gas deposits (discovered in 1956), with about 2.6 million bpd output and accounts for 90% of Nigeria's foreign exchange earnings is riddled with poverty, disease, and the lack of basic infrastructure for habitation³³. The minority ethnic nationalities of the oil-rich delta have been critical of the major ethnic nationalities (Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa-Fulani) that control political power and resources at the federal level to their disadvantage. Hence, these minority ethnic nationalities of the delta lack power to make fundamental political and economic policies in their favor. The balance of power in Nigeria is based on the supremacy of the 'sectional' or 'national' interest over local rights. This is a country where a powerful individual or group, with the aid of state apparatuses, is able to influence national decisions in its favor thereby creating imbalance, distortion, and inequality in the allocation and distribution of resources³⁴. The oil bearing communities of the delta have articulated and protested in various forms over the years, including the halting of oil production, prevention of construction work, damage to property, hostage taking and the Ogele procession³⁵.

The first protest mobilization against was started by Isaac Adaka Boro and his 59-man Niger Delta Volunteer Service (NDVS) on the early hours of February 23, 1966 when he declared the Izon territory (including Gbaramatu) the 'Niger Delta Republic'³⁶. Boro and his compatriots' now famous 12-day revolution was necessitated by social neglect, ethnic chauvinism, political marginalization and economic strangulation orchestrated by the Nigerian ruling elites. This much was made clear by Major Boro himself while addressing his men and drawing the attention of the world to the anomalies on the morning of February 23, when he said;

Today is a great day, not only in your lives but also in the history of the Niger Delta. Perhaps it will be the greatest day for a very long time. This is not because we -are going to bring the heavens down, but because we

³² The Treaties with the Itsekiris were said to have been signed; on board H.B. M.S. 'Flirt' stationed in Benin River on July 16, 1884 and on board H.M. 'Alecto' in August 2, 1894 also in Benin, while treaties with Urhobos were; Treaty with Agbassa (1893), Treaty with Edjebe (1893), Treaty with Obodoodoo 'Igbudu' (1893 and Treaty with Ogunu (1893).

³³ Diepreye Alamieyeseigha, 'Energy, Environment and Disaster: The Niger Delta Experience' being a lecture delivered as Governor of Bayelsa at the International Conference on Energy, Environment and Disaster, Charlotte, North Carolina, U.S.A, July 24, 2005, p., 6.

³⁴ See Karthryn N. Nwajiaka's PhD work, "Oil Politics and Identity Transformation in Nigeria: The Case of the Ijaw in the Niger Delta", Department of Politics, University of Oxford, 2005.

³⁵ Ogele is a peaceful procession by Izon youths marching on the streets of major cities singing Izon songs accompanied by drums and dancing to draw the attention of all, to perceived or real injustice in society orchestrated by Government.

³⁶ Tony Tebekaemi (ed), *The Twelve-Day Revolution*, Benin City: Umeh Publishers, 1982. The first uprising against the Nigerian State is well documented in this work by Boro.

are going to demonstrate to the world what and how we feel about oppression³⁷.

The above quote is 'engraved' in the mind of every Izon activist, and 'freedom fighter'; young or old, male or female. Major Boro certainly was ahead of his time, and "if someone is merely ahead of his time, it will surely catch him up one day", says Wittgenstein³⁸. He was killed in 1970 during the Nigerian civil war.

The struggle for socio-political and economic justice did not die with Boro in the Niger Delta, but took on a non-violent dimension with the emergence of Ken Saro-Wiwa and the formation of the Ogoni grassroots movement, Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP) in the early 1990s³⁹. The Ogonis successfully stopped Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC) and all oil activities in the whole of Ogoni land through peaceful non-violent mass action in 1993. However, the Nigerian state under military dictator General Sani Abacha and SPDC retaliated with the arrest, torture, detention, trial and the subsequent execution of Ken Saro Wiwa and the leadership of MOSOP on November 10, 1995⁴⁰. The predatory government of Abacha and the market forces (the need to export more oil irrespective of the cost imposed upon the people) silenced once again a beloved voice of the delta demanding justice. Anna Zalik was right when she aptly described Nigeria's Niger Delta as "a region that has been marked by a history of state and petroleum industry collusion both in social repression and environmental destruction"⁴¹, while for Michael Watts it is a region embroiled in 'petro-violence'⁴². Ken Saro-Wiwa, President of Ogoni and the voice of the delta, while addressing the 'kangaroo tribunal' before the final judgment to take his life was pronounced, made a valid prediction when he said:

I predict that a denouement of the riddle of the Niger Delta will soon come. The agenda is being set for this trial. Whether the peaceful ways favoured will prevail depends on what the oppressor decides, what signals it sends out to the waiting public....I call upon the Ogoni people,

³⁷ Ibid., p. 116.

³⁸ Ludwig Wittgenstein, Trans. By Peter Winch, *Culture and Values*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984, p., 8.

³⁹ For the story on Ken and MOSOP see Ken Saro-Wiwa, *A Month and A Day: A Detention Diary*, London: Penguin Books, 1995, Ken Saro-Wiwa, *Genocide In Nigeria: The Ogoni Tragedy*, PortHarcourt: Saros International Publishers, 1992. Also see Ike Gerrard Okonta's work, *The Struggle of the Ogoni for Self-Determination*, PhD Thesis, Department of Politics, University of Oxford, 2002.

⁴⁰ The experience of the Ogoni in the hands of the Nigerian military and SPDC is well documented in a report by Human Rights Watch, *The Price of Oil: Corporate Responsibility and Human Rights Violations in Nigeria's Oil Producing Communities*, New York, 1999, www.hrw.org/Nigeria. Also, see a report by the Civil liberties Organisation (CLO), *Repression in the Niger Delta*, Lagos, 2001.

⁴¹ Anna Zalik, "The Niger Delta: 'Petro-Violence' and 'Partnership Development'", Review of African political economy: No 101: 401-424 .

⁴² Michael Watts, 'Petro-Violence: Community, Extraction, and Political Ecology of a Mythic Community' in Nancy Lee Peluso and Michael Watts (eds), *Violent Environments*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001.

the peoples of the Niger Delta, and the oppressed minorities of Nigeria to stand up now and fight fearlessly and peacefully for their rights⁴³.

Since the state murder of Saro-Wiwa, things have moved from bad to worse⁴⁴. The poverty rate, disease, death and killings in the delta by government forces deployed to protect oil facilities have increased across the delta. In response to agitations, the Nigerian Government and oil companies have devised, practiced and adopted repressive policy implementation and militarization of oil communities in the delta, which has left trails of 'sorrow, tears, blood' and death, with a heavy toll on human rights in the areas. There have been judicial and extra-judicial killings, disappearances, state orchestrated communal conflicts, beatings, detentions and threats. Also, entire villages and communities have been razed to the ground as in the case of Odi in 1999 and Odioma in 2005⁴⁵.

To understand and overcome the crisis in Gbaramatu clan, it would be necessary to unravel the connections between extreme poverty, social deprivation, political marginalization and oil extraction. Like all other oil bearing communities of the delta, the present excruciating poverty prevailing in Gbaramatu clan is not historical—the turning point was the influx of the trans-national oil companies some four decades ago with the commencement of seismic activities by SPDC in 1959 at the present Jones creek flow station located in the territories of Okerenkoko. The company started full oil operations in 1968 and since then life has not been the same again both for the people and the environment. The lands, waters and creeks of Gbaramatu territory have been devastated and despoiled by the activities of oil extraction: sources of livelihood have been lost to erosion, ships carrying heavy equipment to oil locations, and the canalization of salt water into fresh water to enable navigation for oil activities. The evident poverty in Gbaramatu, according to Chief Bubo, is due to the lack of adequate arrangement and eco-friendly techniques by the oil companies operating recklessly in this marshy terrain of the delta⁴⁶.

Since the inception of oil exploration in Gbaramatu (1959) to date, no Memorandum of Understanding (MoU, either local or global) has been entered into with

⁴³ Ike Okonta and Orono Douglas, *Where the Vultures Feast: Shell, Human Rights and Oil in the Niger Delta*, San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 2001, p., 209. This book also contain the activities of the Shell trans-national corporation (SPDC) and human rights violations in Nigeria.

⁴⁴For some of the human rights abuses and violence against oil-bearing communities of the delta see, 'The Shell Report: Continuing Abuses in Nigeria 10 years after the Killing of Ken Saro-Wiwa', Environmental Rights Action/Friends of the Earth, Nigeria, 2005, see also International Crisis Groups reports "The Swamps of Insurgency: Nigeria's Delta Unrest" August 2006, and "Fuelling The Niger Delta Crisis", September, 2006.

⁴⁵ For more information on the destruction of Odi see, "A Blanket of Silence: Images of the Odi Genocide", a report by Environmental Rights Action/Friends of the Earth, Nigeria, Lagos, 2002. For Odioma see Elias Courson, "Odi Revisited? Oil and State Violence in Odioma, Brass LGA, Bayelsa State", *Economics of Violence Project Working Paper No. 7*, Institute of International Studies, University of California, Berkeley, 2006.

⁴⁶ Chief A.M Bubo and other Chiefs (Okirika and Ari) were very emphatic that the present condition of the people is not tolerable and accused the TNCs and the Nigerian Governments of total neglect.

the host communities or the clan by the oil majors operating in the area⁴⁷. Gbaramatu clan is host to Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC) and ChevronTexaco. There are oil facilities such as pipelines, rigs, terminals and wells criss-crossing the whole territory of Gbaramatu. Gbaramatu clan also hosts some of the major flow stations in Nigeria's Niger Delta belonging to SPDC and ChevronTexaco. All SPDC flow stations are further connected to a trunk line that leads to Forcados loading terminal, while those of ChevronTexaco are connected to another trunk line that leads to Escravos loading terminal. The wells criss-crossing the creeks, waters and lands are connected to the following flow stations in the territory of Gbaramatu;

Flow stations owned and solely operated by SPDC in Gbaramatu clan are;

- Jones Creek flow station (considered the largest single flow station in West Africa), with Okerenkoko community of Gbaramatu as host
- Egwa I flow station, with Egwa and Okerenkoko communities as hosts
- Egwa II flow station, with Kunukunuma and Kantu as hosts

Flow stations owned and operated by ChevronTexaco in Gbaramatu are:

- Utunana flow station, with Kokodiagbene as host community
- Didi and Alero flow stations are connected to Utunana flow station of Kokodiagbene
- Makaraba flow station, with Makaraba and Okoitoru as host communities
- Abiteye flow station, with Binikurukuru and Kenghagbene as hosts

Gbaramatu clan produces a total of about 400,000 bpd of oil, which is the mainstay of Nigeria's foreign exchange, yet there is nothing to show for this huge sacrifice from these host communities or the clan herself; no electricity, roads, schools, drinkable water and hospitals and the inhabitants still and continue to live in thatch stilt houses. The human propelled dug out canoe is the major means of transportation in this waterlogged territory. It takes a 75 horse-power engine boat about 2 hours to travel from the Nigerian Ports Authority (NPA) Jetty (water-front) in Warri City to Oporoza at the cost of about N2,000 (Naira), which is unaffordable to most inhabitants of Gbaramatu clan. A liter of fuel (PMS) which is sold officially in Nigeria (courtesy President Olusegun Obasanjo) for N65 (Naira), is sold for N200 (Naira) in the Gbaramatu territory⁴⁸. The excruciating poverty in the territory is due to the fact that fishing, the dominant occupation of the people, has been dramatically reduced due to oil activities and extensive pollution. The people defecate, drink and bathe in this

⁴⁷ This action according to the Chiefs (Okirika, Bubo and Ari) is due to lack of regard for the people and is attributed to most of the crisis in the territory with the TNCs because they are operating on self-made or externally imposed regulations on the people of Gbaramatu. This is in part due to the Land Use Act, the Pipeline Act and other regulations still in operation that have deprived the people of the Niger delta of their existence, survival and humanity. The companies operate with impunity under the guise of these laws that have taken from the people their right to their immediate environment, hence their personhood.

⁴⁸ This price is for those buying at NPA Jetty (water-front) in Warri City, the price is higher in the creeks. The farther you go into the creeks the higher the price of fuel in the Niger Delta, and there is no government transportation in these territories of Nigeria or subsidy of any kind. The cost of transportation in the creeks and waters of the delta is sometimes 50 times what obtains on land. Cost of living is also very high compared to the cities.

polluted water and streams of Gbaramatu, leading to the rampant outbreaks of various ailments and diseases in the territory, and subsequent deaths due to lack of medical facilities. This is the irony of a people feeding “120 million Nigerians, but do not have food in their own plate”. Despite the Niger delta’s vast oil output many inhabitants are extremely poor and unable to afford two meals a day.

The aim of the struggle for the people of Gbaramatu clan is not only to receive assistance from the oil revenues, acquire social amenities, but also gain more political participation and rights in Warri, Delta state and Nigeria in general. The area was affiliated to the Forcados colonial administration in the 1920s, but for administrative purposes was brought into Warri province with the Urhobos and Itsekiris around the 1930s. The crisis rocking the territory could be traced to the 1950s when Gbaramatu fell into the Western region with the Action Group (AG) of the Yorubas dominating the regional territory. Unlike the Itsekiris and Urhobos who embraced education early, the Gbaramatu people were not as educated as the other ethnic nationalities in the territory, hence they largely ignored political matters in the country and were disenfranchised based. According to Chief Ari, “when we came into the scene, there was this rumor that a clause in the Western region law says we can vote and not be voted for, this led us to research into the archives at the University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria, and it was then discovered that in ‘Cap 19, p., 268’, of the Western Regional law that the clause had been misquoted”⁴⁹, but before this time many have been disqualified based on this false and unsubstantiated rumor. While this rumor was laid to rest in the 1960s, the damage had been done to the Gbaramatu men and women who have been marginalized in terms of their political representation..

The present three Local Government Councils of Warri (Warri North, Warri Central and Warri South-West) were all together and known as Warri Local Government Area, encompassing the Izons, Itsekiris and Urhobos. The LGA was dominated by the Itsekiris and in 1991, because of the need for political participation, economic empowerment and self-determination, the Izons of Gbaramatu clan, Egbema clan, Ogbe-Ijoh clan and Isaba demanded for the creation of a homogeneous and autonomous local government to be called Nein-Ibe (meaning ‘four clans’) with headquarters in Oporoza. It is widely believed by the Izons that three days into the discussions of local government creation some influential Itsekiris used their network connections to prevent the creation of the LGA. Instead Warri North LGA was created with a headquarters in Koko, an Itsekiri town, alleging that Oporoza was merely a fishing camp⁵⁰. Nigeria at this point was under military rule where powerful machine

⁴⁹ Chief Okirika and Bubo who corroborated this view says to date there is no political representation of Gbaramatu in Government either as Local Government Chairman or at the state or federal levels. Chief A.M Bubo contested on the platform of Midwestern Democratic Front (MDF) to the Western House of Parliament in 1964 and the Bendel State House of Assembly, while Chief Okirika contested and won a councillorship position in the Warri Local Council in 1976.

⁵⁰ The Izons protested the decision vehemently only in writing, which led to the transfer of Ogbe-Ijoh, Gbaramatu and Isaba to Warri South LGA, while the Egbemas remained with Warri North LGA. The decision, Chiefs allege, was a deliberate attempt to balkanise the Izons to different LGAs as minorities without any stake politically. This, they say, is the same way the Izons who are contiguous in the coastal

politicians in and out of government were able to sway decisions to their favor irrespective of the consequences for the local populace. Thus, states and local government areas were created arbitrarily without regard to population density or revenue derivation. For instance, Kano state has 44 LGAs and Lagos state has about 23 even though the latter has a greater population and revenue base.

The Izons of Warri continued their protests (petitions) and struggles for an autonomous and homogeneous LGA. In 1996, a formal request for an autonomous LGA signed by Chiefs E.K Clark, Etoromi, Okirika, Mamamu and others on behalf of the Izons of Warri was formally presented to the federal government of Nigeria⁵¹. On October 1, 1996, the government of General Sanni Abacha announced the creation of six new states and new LGAs for the Nigeria federation: Warri South LGA was created for the Izons of Gbaramatu, Ogbe-ljo, Isaba and Diebiri with headquarters at Ogbe-ljo. The announcement of the newly created LGAs and headquarters in Delta state was made by the State Military Administrator, Col. David J. Dungs⁵². And immediately after the announcement of Warri South LGA with headquarters at Ogbe-ljoh, prominent Izon leaders, sons and daughters contributed financially and materially for its take off. The LGA functioned with Ogbe-ljo as headquarter until a federal government gazette published (after four months of its operation in Ogbe-ljo) changed the headquarter to Ogidigben, an Itsekiri coastal town near Escravos.

The Izons whose jubilation was cut short by this sudden turn-around did not only protest the decision, but sent representatives of elders to Asaba (headquarters of Delta State to discuss with the Governor) and Abuja to persuade Government at various levels to rescind the decision and forestall violence. All appeals by well meaning Nigerians and Izons of Delta state fell on deaf ears both at the state and federal levels of government. Oboko Bello and many other Izons of Delta state attribute the current crisis rocking Gbaramatu as, "resistance against internal neo-colonialism perpetrated by the Itsekiris and their government collaborators"⁵³.

In March 1997, when all pleas to relocate the LGA back to Ogbe-ljoh as demanded by the Izon leaders of thought and well-meaning Nigerians failed, the youth took center stage by peacefully shutting down all flow stations in Gbaramatu and its surroundings to draw the attention of the government to the anomalies of the relocation. The youths insisted on occupying the flow stations peacefully until the LGA headquarter was relocated back to Ogbe-ljoh. The youths' action, and the fact that the

territory have been balkanised into more than five states in Nigeria making them insignificant wherever they find themselves.

⁵¹ Chief E.K Clark's interview on the Warri crisis in *Tell News-magazine*, Lagos, September 1, 2003.

⁵² The three LGAs of Warri as announced by Col. J. Dungs were: Warri South (now Warri South-West), Warri Central (now called Warri South) and Warri North. There was jubilation, singing, dancing and drinking in most Izon communities that accompanied the announcement. This for the Izon was political and economic self-determination and human empowerment achieved. The first Chairman of the LGA was an Izon named Couple Oromine, but since the relocation and re-relocation brouhaha commenced no Izon has headed the LGA to date.

⁵³ Oboko Bello is an activist and President (now former), Federated Niger Delta Ijaw Communities (FNDIC). The Izons allege that their plea for the relocation back to Ogbe-ljo failed because the Itsekiris insisted and influenced the decision of the relocation to Ogidigben.

country was losing roughly 1/6 of its total oil output necessitated that the government invite the elders to a meeting in Asaba to discuss with the Military Administrator in order to revolve the LGA quagmire. The delegation to Asaba was led by the Izon national leader Chief E.K Clark (a former Minister of Information at the federal level). While away in Asaba to meet with the Military Governor, Col. Dungs, Chief E.K Clark's house at No. 10, Baptist Mission Road was razed to the ground and his night security guard murdered by people suspected to be Itsekiri militants⁵⁴. The burning and counter-burning of houses and killings by the Itsekiri and Izon deteriorated with heavy casualties on both sides from March to May 1997 and no concrete efforts were undertaken by the government to address the situation (except the deployment of military troops who only exacerbated the already high tension and violence beyond boiling point) which had claimed hundreds of lives up to June 1997. In June 1997, The Military Administrator of Delta state, Col. Dungs, appointed a commission of inquiry headed by Justice Hassan Idoko, to look into the immediate and remote cause(s) of the crisis and make recommendations to Government. The committee, which was composed of Izens, Itsekiri and Urhobos, met between June and July 1997. However, towards the end of the committee's work, the Itsekiri members of the committee staged a walkout pre-empting the outcome to be unfavorable for the Itsekiri nationality of Warri. In any case, the report or "government white paper" on the committee is yet to be released. Most committee reports in Nigeria are not released to the public. Hence, immediately a committee is appointed to look into any issue however important, that's the end of the matter. The appointment of committees in national and state matters is now seen as a way of window-dressing an important state matter that ought to be addressed properly in order to prevent a reoccurrence⁵⁵.

Sometime around September 1997, the Military Administrator of Delta state, Col. David Dungs was redeployed and Commander Walter Feghabo an Izon officer was deployed to Delta state as military administration. On taking office, Feghabo witnessed a serious crisis between the Itsekiri and Izon at Ogbe-Ijoh which claimed many lives and property. He therefore, after an on-the-spot assessment of damage, immediately called for a meeting of the three ethnic nationalities and promised to release the report of the Justice Hassan Idoko commission of enquiry on the Warri crisis⁵⁶. The crisis could be attributed to the quest for political power and control of the Warri land by the three ethnic nationalities (itsekiri, Urhobo and Izon). The famous environmental activist, Orono Douglas rightly stated;

⁵⁴ The Izens believe that Chief E.K Clark was the target of the attack because he was (and still is) perceived as an advocate and outspoken Izon leader. This is the point at which the Izon youths vowed to resist the attack and retaliated by burning houses belonging to Itsekiris within the Warri metropolis. The stage was thus set for burning, killing and destruction amongst the Izens and Itsekiris which continued without significant intervention by government till June 1997.

⁵⁵ In the aviation sector, for instance, we have witnessed more than 5 fatal accidents (for the year 2006 alone) with many lives lost and in all committees have been appointed to look into the crash, but no 'government white paper' or report has been released to the general public to date.

⁵⁶ The relative peace during his tenure as Governor of Delta state is attributed to this promise to release the report or 'white paper' of the Justice Hassan Idoko Commission's report. The promise to release the report did not materialise and by May, 1999 the people ran out of patience once again insinuating (and rightly because it is not released to date) that the report will not see the light of day and will fizzle out like other committee or commission reports gathering dust in Nigeria.

Power is a Resource; If you have it you can give life to your people. The struggle for power especially in evolving democracies is not just a struggle for life in the present: it is a struggle for life in the future. Power can be used to build institutions that prevent dictatorships, genuinely abhor corruption and ensure equity and justice in the polity⁵⁷. (edited formatting, font size)

On May 29, 1999, while the swearing-in ceremony of the President Chief Olusegun Obasanjo and the Governors was celebrated with dancing, drinking in Abuja, Asaba and other states, a fierce battle between the Izon and the Itsekiri was also going on in the creeks of Warri in Delta state, near Escravos. This incidence claimed hundreds of lives, property, and villages. Some villages were completely destroyed by armed youths from both sides: Kpokpo and Madangho border communities for the Izon and Itsekiri respectively, were destroyed. This was taking place simultaneously with the swearing-in ceremony of James Onanefe Ibori, the Governor of Delta state, an Urhobo indigene. The newly sworn-in Governor imposed a curfew, and immediately after the inauguration of the State House of Assembly, Governor James Ibori sponsored a bill requesting the relocation of the headquarters of Warri South-West LGA from Ogidigben an Itsekiri community to Ogbe-ljoh an Izon community. The new President of the country Olusegun Obasanjo also visited the state in June and promised to proffer a lasting and just solution. The President's visit was due to the crippling effect of the crisis on oil activities in the territory (there was a lose of about 300,000 bpd). While the Itsekiris protested the bill, the bill was passed into law in November 1999 by the Delta state House of Assembly⁵⁸.

If the establishment of the LGA seemed to secure the basis for agreement for the Izon, a new set of battles emerged at another political level. The Local Government area was created initially with ten Izon wards as Warri South LGA, but with the relocation the LGA, was renamed Warri South-West LGA with two Itsekiri wards added from Warri North LGA. The Izon wards were reduced to six and further reduced to four wards while the Itsekiris have 6 wards⁵⁹. Also, the Chairman of the LGA at the time of the passage of the bill, Hon. David Atikpe, an Itsekiri man, refused to

⁵⁷ Orono Douglas, 'The Imperative of A Nigerian President From The South-South', presented to the South- South Senators of Nigeria in Yenagoa, Bayelsa state, June, 2006. In the paper he presented 10 reasons why the south-south should produce the next President of Nigeria.

⁵⁸ Three out of the four Itsekiri members of the Delta State House of Assembly staged a walkout and took the Government of Delta state to court. The case is still pending to date. The only Itsekiri member who stayed back was the Speaker of the Delta State House of Assembly, Late Hon. Francis Emegbele. The Izon were said to have boycotted the voters registration exercise of 1998 due to ward delineation conflicts, hence, could not participate in the 1999 election. In 2000 there was voters registration undertaken to register the Izens and a call for bye-election into the Izon four wards. It was however, discovered that an Itsekiri man was representing a Gbaramatu ward (Okerenkoko ward) at the LGA as Councillor, hence, the bye-election was again boycotted and things degenerated once again in the territory. Also, the Izon of Gbaramatu took the matter to court for adjudication. The Izens in the same vein boycotted the 2002 voters' registration exercise.

⁵⁹ The Izens claim that wards should be delineated in accordance with population and that they have 63% while the Itsekiris have 37% in the Warri South-West LGA as presently constituted.

relocate as directed by law. Now contested is the equitable delineation of constituencies in the Warri South-West LGA.

The Izon women of Gbaramatu and Egbema clans took center stage in 2002 protesting the socio-economic and political condition of the people by peacefully occupying the Abiteye flow station and insisting to remain there until their demands for employment, scholarships, micro-credit scheme and provision of infrastructure in the two clans were fulfilled⁶⁰. Some of the women were brutalized by the military invited by the oil companies. This military brutality was re-enacted again when the women from Itsekiri, Izon, and Urhobo came under one umbrella body and protested the inhumane condition of their people at the ChevronTexaco office at Warri.⁶¹ The Gbaramatu youths who dared to protest the political and other socio-economic injustices by peacefully occupying flow stations and other oil facilities within Gbaramatu territory to draw the attention of the government and international community to their plight were not only beaten, brutalized and horse-whipped; many of them were shot to death by the military⁶². The youths thus decided to match the military 'force for force', 'gun for gun' and 'violence for violence'. This is the genealogy of the militancy or 'democratization of violence' currently pervading the Gbaramatu territory. To worsen the already tense situation, the federal government officially drafted a combined military force code named Joint Task Force (JTF), "Operation Restore Hope" into the delta of Nigeria in 2003 to kill, brutalize, maim, and render invalid persons who dare protest the prevailing socio-economic or political conditions of the peoples of the oil producing communities. In any case, from this moment up there has been constant violent friction involving the military and the youths in Warri leading to a loss of lives and property⁶³. For instance, in the third week of March 2003 the "biggest military operations ever mounted in peace time Nigeria against a civilian population was said to have been undertaken by the military in Okerenkoko community"⁶⁴. The invasion by the military against Okerenkoko which claimed the lives of twenty-two Izon youths and three soldiers was considered "purely economic and ethnic agenda and the failure of successive leaders within the polity to build a truly national security defense system aimed at fighting poverty, underdevelopment, environmental despoliation and ignorance"⁶⁵.

⁶⁰ Before the protest by the Izon women Itsekiri women had in July 8-18, 2002, protested the same excruciating socio-economic conditions by peacefully taking over ChevronTexaco airstrip at the Escravos export terminal and occupied the place for ten days with a promise to leave only if their demands are met

⁶¹ For the women protests and other human rights abuses in the Niger Delta, Gbaramatu and Warri see Ibaiba DonPedro works, *Out of a Bleak Landscape*, Lagos: Forward Communications Ltd., 2005, See also, *Oil in the Water: Crude Power and Militancy in the Niger Delta*, Lagos: Forward Communications Ltd., 2006.

⁶² Any time the army is drafted to any scene in Nigeria whether violent or peaceful, there are human casualties. Extra-legal killings and human rights violations by the army is very rampant in the Niger Delta of Nigeria: this is done on a daily basis with impunity.

⁶³ For the various crisis in Warri see Human Rights Watch reports, *The Warri Crisis: Fuelling Violence*, December, 2003, *The Niger Delta: No Democratic Dividends*, October 2002. Also see Ijaw Council for Human Rights (ICHR), Briefing Note I, March 2003.

⁶⁴ See Ijaw Council for Human Rights (ICHR), Briefing Note I, March 2003.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p., 2. The crisis was said to have been caused by the activities of oil bunkerers (oil thieves) in the Warri waterways. The military officers have been accused of their involvement in bunkering activities; this led to the removal of Zemani Elias as head of JTF in March, 2006. Elias Zemani also accused top political leaders in their involvement in this illegal trade.

The Nigerian elections of 2003, did not only heighten the already tense situation in the Niger Delta, but in practice “democratized violence” producing a geometric increase in state coercion and the deployment of ethnic militia armed by political leaders to perpetuate themselves in office at the federal and state levels. The election in the Niger Delta was nothing but a crude and violent struggle for the control of the resources of the region by the ruling class and their desire to continue to impoverish and under-develop the region with its abundant oil deposits.

The action and inaction of the federal government on the Niger Delta situation is due to its joint-venture partnership with the oil majors operating the very lucrative oil wells of the Niger Delta, while the federal government play the “role of the state as facilitator for the reproduction of oil-based accumulation in Nigeria carves for it a mediator role in global-local relations”⁶⁶. The Nigerian state depends solely on the revenues from oil, hence, the internal dynamics and contradictions (culture, economy, politics etc.,) of the state dictates that Nigeria should defend oil capital coercively by forcing its authority, wish and power locally⁶⁷. This corrupt alliance between the transnational corporations and the Nigerian federal Government has taken the land, sea, air, and streams from the local populace. This joint-venture alliance is the reason and justification for the state’s provision of military support to TNCs in the Niger Delta and the inability of the state to enact adequate laws regulating the operations of the corporations, while the oil bearing communities struggle for local autonomy and survival. The Government and the TNCs, are therefore, ready to do anything (including manipulating elections and installing lackeys/puppets into political positions) to maintain the *status quo ante bellum*, in any part of the Niger Delta.

MEND: ‘GUN-BOAT DIPLOMACY’⁶⁸ AND POLITICAL MILITANCY UNLIMITED

Behind the mask of the MEND militant is a political subject forced to pick up an AK47 to restore his rights as a citizen⁶⁹.

- Ike Okonta

⁶⁶ See Cyril I. Obi, ‘Global, State, and Local Intersections: power, authority and conflict in the Niger Delta oil communities, in Thomas M. Callaghy, Ronald Kassimir and Robert Latham, *Intervention and Transformation in Africa: Global-Local Networks of Power*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, p., 175. See also Anna Zalik, ‘The Peace of the Graveyard: The Voluntary Principles on Security and Human Rights in the Niger Delta’, in *Global Regulation: Managing Crises after the Imperial Turn*, Assassi, van der Pijl and Wigan, Cornell University, 2004.

⁶⁷ See Cyril I Obi, *ibid.*, p., 173. For instance, it was revealed during the Human Rights Violations Investigations and Reconciliation Commission’s (aka Oputa Panel) sitting that the TNCs contributed the sum of about 40 million USD to the maximum dictator General Sani Abacha for his life President ambition just to maintain the status quo and operate under military shield and recklessly too.

⁶⁸ This was the description of goings-on in Gbaramatu and its environ by two Warri based activists, Mr. Paul Bebenimibo and Dennis Otuario (now President and Secretary of FNDIC respectively) during my oral conversation with them in September, 2006.

⁶⁹ See Ike Okonta, ‘Behind the Mask: Explaining the Emergence of the MEND Militia in Nigeria’s Oil Bearing Niger Delta’, *Pambazuka news*, 2006.

The rise of MEND (Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta) in late 2005 has rocked the oil industry in Gbaramatu territory and beyond. It has its roots in the contemporary Izon struggle for socio-economic and political self-determination within the Nigerian federation, starting in the 1990s. The Nigerian state by the 1980s, decades after the discovery and extraction of oil from the Niger Delta, had become almost completely economically dependent on the oil and gas production for its survival as a nation. However, the dividends of oil production are very slow to trickle down to the majority of the population of the oil-bearing communities, who instead have been forced to abandon their fishing and agriculture trade due to the devastation of the land and environment. The delta indigenes become poorer and poorer by the day while the population steadily grows to an estimated 30 million as of 2005, accounting for more than 23% of the country's overall population.

In a recent report on the Niger Delta by 65 Nobel Laureates comprising the Commission of Nobel Laureates on Peace, Equity and Development⁷⁰, the August body which visited the Delta in 2006, noted that: "the Niger Delta produces majority of Nigeria's wealth, but enjoys only a small portion of its returns, the rise of militias in the region is a consequence of massive unemployment and lack of socio-economic development and that wealth earmarked for the region is substantial, but it is largely stolen by politicians and their supporters who benefit from continued crisis"⁷¹. The Nobel Laureates also opined further observing that "about 4,000 oil spills have been discharged into the territory since the 60s, and the country since the 70s has earned at least \$300 billion from oil and gas extracted from the Niger Delta, the country is also expected to increase its oil production estimated at 4 million bpd by 2010 and also that most of the oil and gas reserves are found in Izon territories of the Niger Delta"⁷².

In the early 90s, due to the growing population of unemployed youths, socio-economic neglect, and political marginalization, the Izon ethnic nationality, balkanized into various coastal states of the Niger Delta, decided to come together under one umbrella organization called the Izon National Congress (INC)⁷³. The organization aimed to bring the Ijaws together to forge ahead politically, economically and socially within the Nigerian federation. The Izon National Congress demanded the Nigerian state treat the Ijaws fairly considering their huge contribution to the economy. Meanwhile, the organization that aims to achieve justice for the Izons engaged in lobby and petitions to the federal government to treat the Izons fairly, justly and equitably. The Izon umbrella organization demanded three contiguous, autonomous and homogeneous Izon states (namely, Abayelsa, Toru Ebe, and Oil Rivers States) along the

⁷⁰ Wole Soyinka, the Nigerian Nobel laureate for Literature in 1986 was part of the delegation that visited the Niger Delta in 2006 and signatory to the report.

⁷¹ See *Vanguard Newspaper*, Lagos, December 2, 2006. See also UNDP, *Human Development in the Niger Delta*. New York, 2006.

⁷² See *Vanguard Newspaper*, Lagos, December 2, 2006.

⁷³ See Kathryn N. Nwajiaka, 'Oil Politics and Identity Transformation in Nigeria: The Case of Ijaw in the Niger Delta', Unpublished PhD Thesis, Department of Politics, University of Oxford, 2005, for a scholarly study of the Ijaw National Congress (INC) struggle.

coast of the Niger Delta. This demand was borne out of the fact that the Izons who are considered the fourth largest ethnic nationality in Nigeria do not have any state of their own (as from 1995). Instead they are balkanized into about six states of the federation, while the other three major ethnic nationalities (Hausa-Fulani, Igbo and Yoruba) all have three or more states of the federation. Also, in view of the fact that the Izon territory economically sustains the Nigeria federation with its oil deposits that are tapped daily, benefiting other nationalities through states and LGA allocations. Thus, in 1996 the Administration of General Sani Abacha, while announcing the creation of more states and LGA in Nigeria announced the creation of Bayelsa state. This was also the same period Warri South-West LGA was created with headquarters in Ogbe-Ijoh, and another LGA was created for the Izons in Ondo state with headquarters at Igbekebo. The LGA created in Ondo state like the Warri South-West drew a violent conflict between the Izons in Ondo state and the Ilajes because the Ilajes argued that the Ijaws are tenants, and therefore should not be entitled to political self-rule. The crisis that followed in 1996 and 1997 claimed many lives and a number of communities were wiped out of existence⁷⁴.



⁷⁴ The crisis was actually between the Arogo Izons and the Ugbo Ilajes. This crisis preceded the Warri crisis. During my coastal study research for the World Bank in 2004 to this territory, it was claimed that about 50 Ilaje communities/villages were destroyed, while the Ijaws also lost about 18 communities/villages. The number of deaths could not be ascertained, but it definitely was large.

The various crises involving Izon and their neighbors and the attitude of the federal government towards the resolution of these crises in the territory, coupled with the murderous hanging of the Ogoni activist Ken Saro-Wiwa exacerbated issues and events in the Niger Delta, especially the Izon territories. Though Ken Saro-Wiwa was dead, the message continues to live and spread like wild fire: “RESOURCE CONTROL AND SELF-DETERMINATION”. Thus, a pocket of pressure groups and self-determination organizations surfaced in the delta of Nigeria including MOSIEND (Movement for the Survival of the Ijaw Ethnic Nationality in the Niger Delta), EBA (Egbesu Boys of Africa), SEA (Supreme Egbesu Assembly) and others.

The critical and turning point was the December 11, 1998 All Ijaw Youth Conference (IYC) at Kaiama, attended by Izon youth drawn from over five hundred communities, from over forty Izon clans and representing 25 representative organizations, crystallized the Izon struggle for “resource control and self-



determination”, now popularly called the Kaiama Declaration⁷⁵. In a communiqué produced after exhaustive deliberations, the youth resolved that “all land and natural resources within Izon territory belong to Izon communities and are the basis of our

⁷⁵ The Kaiama Declaration, Communique of the All Ijaw Youth Conference held in December 11, 1998 at Kaiama. The Kaiama declaration was witnessed by activists of non Izon extraction who supported the idea.

survival”, the immediate withdrawal of military forces occupying the Izon territories, and that oil companies operating under the shield of the military will be regarded as an enemy of the Izon people. The youth also called for the suspension of oil operations until the matter of “ownership” is resolved. The conference directed all Izon youth to “struggle peacefully for freedom, self-determination and ecological justice”, and prepared a campaign of mass action against the companies called “operation climate change”⁷⁶. The IYC thereafter established the Western, Eastern and Central Zones. The Executive and members of the zones were to oversee the welfare and protection of Izon citizens within their zone and to coordinate the activities of the youth groups in the different Izon territories. There was also a National Executive Council overseeing the activities of the zones and also addressing national issues as they affect the IZONS. As is always the case, the government’s response to the demands was the deployment of about 15,000 soldiers with automatic rifles, tear gas and machine guns to the streets of Bayelsa, Delta and Rivers states. On December 30, 1998 a peaceful Ogele procession of more than 2,500 Izon youth dressed in black in Yenagoa was targeted and shot at by the military killing three, and arresting as many as 30 during the peaceful procession. Thereafter, a peaceful protest for the release of the detained led to the killing of Ghadafi Ezejile and Nwachuku Okeri by the same military⁷⁷. Also, in January 1999, the communities of Opia and Ikiyan in Delta state were destroyed by soldiers from the military base of Chevron in Escravos⁷⁸. The government army went on a rampage destroying and killing in various parts of the region especially in the Izon territories (Yenagoa, Bomadi, Kaiama, Mbiama, etc.,). In some quarters, the IZONS were even tagged secessionists, just to legitimate the military massacres that were taking place. The killings by the military in various parts of Izon land and internal contradictions within the organization led to disagreements on the mode of resistance to be adopted if the struggle must be sustained. While some insisted on the peaceful non-violent method currently employed, others preferred to match the military’s brutality, claiming ‘violence for violence’. This is the origin of ideological divisions within the IYC with regard to method and strategy. Thus, while some decided to form parallel organizations (most of such organizations were affiliated to the IYC), others remained within the IYC. In any case, whether violent or non-violent, the letters of the Kaiama declaration, till date, serves as the sacred canon of the Izon struggle in Nigeria’s Niger Delta⁷⁹.

Thus, MEND if properly analyzed and contextualized, is nothing but the violent outburst of various organizations in the Niger Delta clamoring for socio-economic and political self-determination. In Gbaramatu the faces behind the masks, weapons of ‘self-defense’ and mode of operation may have changed with new entrants, but the demands

⁷⁶ The Kaiama Declaration, Communiqué (1998), p.2.

⁷⁷ For more detail see Civil Liberties Organization, *Repression in the Niger Delta*, CLO, Lagos, 2001.

⁷⁸ For more on the human rights abuses see reports by Environmental Rights Action/Friends of the Earth, Nigeria, See also Human Rights Watch reports on the Niger Delta at www.hrw.org. Also see reports by the Brussels-based organization, International Crisis Group; ‘The Swamps of Insurgency: Nigeria’s Niger Delta Unrest’, August 2006, ‘Fuelling the Niger Delta Crisis’, September 2006, and ‘Nigeria’s Faltering Federal Experiment’, October 2006.

⁷⁹ The IYC brought together the good, bad, beautiful and the ugly in the Izon nation. To understand the contradictions and dynamics without and outside the IYC is itself a PhD exercise that should be undertaken. The happenings in Gbaramatu are a fall-out of the IYC imbroglio.

and conflicts remain the same, the same message of autonomy, and political and economic self-determination is played and replayed by the various successive pressure groups that have arisen from the Gbaramatu territory since 1997 to date, and MEND may not be an exception.

To properly understand the MEND episode, it is important to analyze the various crises and the militia groups that participated actively in the Gbaramatu territory of Warri since 1997 to date. These are crises involving the Izones of Warri and Itsekiri on the one hand and Izone of Warri and the military on the other. The former are a result of political participation (LGA Headquarters relocation and ward delineation), while the latter are a result of the “spoils of oil and gas” (oil theft or ‘bunkering’ and facility protection).

In 1997, the LGA location, relocation and re-relocation crisis involving the Izone and Itsekiri of Warri, various movements and militia groups sprang up in the Gbaramatu axis of Warri with a bid to press home their demand for political and economic autonomy. Some of the militia groups identified within the Gbaramatu territory since the 1997 conflict are the Izone Youth Council (IYC), Egbesu Boys of Africa (EBA), Feibagha Ogbo, Feibokirifagha Ogbo, the ‘dreaded’ Meinbutu Boys, Alagbabagha Ogbo, Alabrakopri, Ogbokonde, Dolphin, Mubotundigha, Agelebagha Ogbo, Torudigha Ogbo, the Niger Delta Volunteer Force (NDVF), the Federated Niger Delta Ijaw Communities (FNDIC) and now MEND⁸⁰.

The Egbesu Boys of Africa (EBA), with the motto “Freedom is our Goal”, was one of the most prominent militia movements during the ’97, ’98 and ’99 crises. The movement was composed of Izones mostly from the delta fringe and was under the command of “Commander” Alex Priye (now deceased)⁸². The movement was the first in the Izone territories of the delta to shut-in flow stations to protest the injustices perpetrated against the Izone nation and her people (though this claim is disputed in some quarters). The movement was composed of some of the most courageous, dynamic and fearless youths of that period, who defended the west as a whole. The

⁸⁰ Some of these pressure groups were less prominent than others either because of the territory they operated or they decided to remain anonymous for security reasons. Some also, could not stand the test of time, while others that were too weak to coalesce with others. Also, most of the groups have no known leader or founder because they were formed spontaneously to respond to the crisis at hand, though there were those whose command and orders were obeyed due to their military exploit, commitment or courage. These movements need to be properly studied and researched for a proper understanding of their workings.

⁸¹ ‘Egbesu’ is a well revered Izone Deity, whose origin or source no one has been able to account, passed down from previous generations to the present. So, for the votaries, it is going back to base, i.e., the original source of ‘Power’ in Izone land. This is the Power the Izones used in fighting the various battles and conquered territories before colonialism and the coming of Christianity. The spirit is imbued in every Izone man, but must observe the rules and regulations for its manifestation/efficacy. It is believed that an Izone man or woman observing the rules and regulations of Egbesu cannot be harmed. Egbesu is justice demanding and forbids adherents being in the offensive, but if as an Izone you are attacked then you are obliged to defend yourself; “no weapon at that point fashioned against you shall prosper”.

⁸² He was killed by yet to be identified persons. However, it is rumoured that his death was a set-up by the government of Nigeria, because he was seen as a threat to the operation and activities of the oil industry especially in the Western delta, even the military feared him as a master of the delta creeks.

militia, also successfully and fearlessly stopped all enemy and military incursion into many territories of Gbaramatu during the crises of '97, '98 and '99. The aim of the movement was to gain political and economic freedom for the Izons and indigenous of the Niger Delta wherever they may be in the Nigerian state. The movement drifted from its set goals in '98 and '99 by indulging in oil contracts, which granted security for the oil industry. The organization was also alleged to have been involved in piracy activities which became very rampant during this period in most Izon territories of the delta. Some also believe that the leadership's closeness to politicians after the '99 election also contributed to the ultimate down fall of the movement. However, it is noteworthy that the leader (Alex Priye) was feared and respected in both military and civil circles. His death in the early 2000 brought an end to the movement, though before his death many members had left to join or form other movements.

Little is known about Feibokirifagha Ogbo, Alagbabagha Ogbo, Alabrako-opiri, Ogbokonde, Dolphin Ogbo, Mubotundigha, Torudigha Ogbo⁸³. These movements participated actively in the crisis of '97, '98 and '99 and some even thereafter, but their involvements need to be researched and articulated properly. The '97, '98 and '99 crises were as a result of LGA headquarters relocation from Ogbe-ljoh to Ogidigben, while crises thereafter were the result of military incursion into the territory. The IYC Western zone, on its part, was more of an advocacy movement that coordinated the territory and most times mediated in the crisis where and when necessary. Its members (even the leadership) may belong to other movements, but the movement itself was seen as an umbrella movement for all western Izons. The involvement of its members (Izon youth) in other militia and movements has caused some observers to believe that the IYC is violent despite evidence to the contrary.

The point should be made that the Izons of Gbaramatu and even other ethnic nationalities in Nigeria, see the creation of states, LGAs or wards as the only legitimate and constitutional means through which they can legitimately gain access to the allocation of oil resources derived from their territory or the Niger Delta and facilitate development. The creation of a state, LGA or even a ward is a process towards the

⁸³ These movements participated actively in the '97, '98 and '99 crises. Some of them are still in existence but definitely not prominent now. It is most likely that some members of these movements or the movements themselves are now part of the MEND drama playing itself out in the swamps of Delta state. The aim of these movements was nothing but the relocation of the LGA headquarters back to Ogbe-ljoh so as to have a sense of government's presence in the territory. The names are significant, for instance, Feibokirifagha means every death man/woman will be buried one way or the other so no one should fear going into a war or even dying. Alagbabagha Ogbo signifies that the members have been spiritually fortified, hence, cannot be harmed by any weapon produced by man, be it gun, cutlass or axe, while Alabrako-opiri signifies that you must deal with your enemy decisively and give to him/her the maximum suffering expected. Ogbokonde signify that these are a group of youths who are ready to take back their lost glory by whatever means. The Dolphin signify that the Izons like the dolphin fish should be respected and given their due place in the anal of things. Mobotundigha Ogbo signify that those who are prepared to do battle don't look back or have cause to fear any person, they have to wage the war until victory is achieved, while the Torudigha Ogbo signify that in a war there is no mercy. The name implies that it is a brutal movement that seems to have no mercy in the cause of war if they are attacked or offended. All these movements are however, guided by the principle of 'don't attack first, but attack only as self defense'.

political and economic empowerment of citizens of particular ethnic nationalities, or region. Thus, the creation of LGA and wards is viewed by the people of Gbaramatu as a genuine process towards the actualization of “resource control and self-determination”. The thinking is that if given an LGA, their sons and daughters will be LGA Chairmen and councilors, receiving allocation for the development of the territory. The Gbaramatu people trace the lack of basic infrastructures in the territory to the lack of their sons and daughters in positions of governance at the LGA, state, and federal levels in Nigeria. This view, however, is not limited to Gbaramatu. Many communities have development projects initiated and implemented because either they have their son or daughter in an influential political position or the community has a political “godfather”. Most communities that do not have reputable politicians or influential individuals in society are neglected and completely abandoned irrespective of their plight. Roads in Nigeria for example, are constructed not out of necessity, but either because an influential politician, Governor, or a political ‘godfather’ inhabits the area.. Thus, the clamor by many ethnic nationalities to make sure their sons/daughters are in political position irrespective of his or her character and this is a reason for the increase in electoral violence in Nigeria⁸⁴. For the Gbaramatu citizens, the only way they can have a legitimate and legal right to the oil resources taken from their land by the ‘petro-state’ is to have an LGA or wards that will reflect the population of the territory. Ike Okonta acknowledged this scenario on his piece in the present drama in the Niger Delta when he said,

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(not) exercise their civil and political rights in the legitimate pursuit of material and social-well-being⁸⁵.

For Oboko Bello, the crisis rocking Warri and its Gbaramatu surroundings since 1997 may not be totally divorced from the perceived “internal neo-colonialism” and the “inability of the Nigerian government, after the transition to civilian rule, delineate electoral constituencies based on the functional 1991 population census”⁸⁶.

The Feibagha Ogbo, Agelebagha Ogbo, Meinbutu Boys, the Niger Delta Volunteer Force (NDVF: different from that of Asari) and the Federated Niger Delta Ijaw Communities (FNDIC) are also militia groups that have been identified among the

⁸⁴ For instance, the President, Olusegun Obasanjo has dualised the road leading to Otta his home town, though most federal roads are in deplorable conditions and also approved the construction/citing of the new LNG in Ogun, his state of origin even though Ogun does not produce a drop of oil. Also, in the forthcoming 2007 elections positions have been divided in the ruling PDP among politicians to the detriment of certain ethnic nationalities or communities in some states of Nigeria. Hence, elections are said to have been conducted about six months before the date: the results are known before the election.

⁸⁵ Ike Okonta, ‘Behind the Mask: Explaining the Emergence of the MEND Militia in Nigeria’s Oil Bearing Niger Delta’, 2006.

⁸⁶ Interview with Oboko Bello, October 2006, in Warri on the MEND crisis. He believes that electoral wards were arbitrarily adopted in favour of the minority Itsekiri in the Warri South-West LGA and that until this anomaly is corrected the territory of Gbaramatu may not have the desired peace.

Warri Izons since the crises emanated in 1997⁸⁷. The Feibagha Ogbo and Agelebagha Ogbo have been in existence from 1997 to date, while the rest came into existence in the 2000s. These groups have been 'active' and played critical roles at one point or the other.

In the crises of 1997-1998, 1999 and 2003, while the dreaded Meinbutu Boys took charge of the Warri mainland, the little known Feibagha Ogbo, Agelebagha Ogbo and others were actually doing the fighting in the creeks of Warri. However, with the relocation of the LGA headquarters in 1999 to Ogbe-Ijoh and the subsequent reduction of the Izon wards from ten to four the conflict and demands took a new dimension. In a press statement of 30th May 2001, the Niger Delta Volunteer Force (NDVF) demanded the stoppage of a by-election scheduled for 2nd of June 2001, by the Delta state Independent Electoral Commission (DSIEC)⁸⁸.

Since the relocation of the LGA in '97 the area has been involved in one crisis or the other leading to stoppage of oil activities in Warri and particularly the Gbaramatu axis, hence; the city and its surroundings have been turned to military base by the government. The United States Government in its 'diplomatic mediation' of the crisis, gave the federal government two gun boats to patrol and protect oil installations in the

⁸⁷ The aim of all these groups like the previous was to see to the relocation of the LGA headquarters back to Ogbe-Ijoh and the proper delineation of constituencies in accordance with the population census of 1991. Feibagha Ogbo signifies immunity to death, so, it is believed that members of this group cannot be killed in a just war, while Agelebagha Ogbo signifies that members of this group are immune to bullets from the barrel of gun, hence have no cause to fear even the military in the quest to derive justice. Meinbutu on its part is a derivation from the names of three Izon clans in western delta i.e., Meintoru, Buloutoru and Tuborutoru. Thus, Meinbutus is an assembly/movement of youths from these three different Izon clans in Warri to forge a common front for political and economic transformation of the areas. The movement which claim that its supposed headquarters is located at 200 nautical miles, south-west of the Escravos, in the Atlantic Ocean, was not only feared and revered even by the Nigerian military, but was fingered as the architect and engine room of Izon militancy during the '97, '98, and '99 crises in Warri. The Niger Delta Volunteer Force, founded in Warri in 2001 was quite different from the Alhaji Asari's NDPVF. The NDVF of Warri was to see to the just delineation of wards in Warri South-West LGA. It was purely a pressure and advocacy group that wanted justice for the Gbaramatu people in the scheme of things in Warri. From various studies the group later transformed itself into the current, youthful, energetic and ubiquitous pressure group FNDIC. This is because most of the demands and leadership of FNDIC are contained in NDVF objectives and demands. The change in name from NDVF to FNDIC may not be unconnected with the emergence of the Asari faction called Niger Delta Peoples Volunteer Force (NDPVF).

⁸⁸ Oboko Bello, then President of the Niger Delta Volunteer Force (NDVF), who delivered the address says the action is due to the fact that the demand of the Izons for an homogeneous and autonomous LGA has been compromised. The court case involving the relocation saga, the selective registration exercise by DSIEC in August, 2000, the fear of domination by the Itsekiris suggests that the Izons may never produce an LGA Chairman or House of Assembly member in the state. The advocacy movement therefore, demanded the stoppage of the bye-election. Also, the organization on 9th July 2001, wrote a letter to the state Governor demanding an audience on the issue of the bye election which was changed in court and physical and verbal attacks on its members. The civic movement met with representatives of the Government on the 20th of August, 2001 for a resolution of the issues raised.. But the matter could not be amicably resolved to the satisfaction of the Izons, even though the bye election was postponed by DSIEC.

delta in 2003⁸⁹. The US' kind 'gun boat diplomatic' gesture to the federal government may not be unconnected with the crisis of March 2003. This gun boat gift was to be followed by the government's official establishment of a security Joint Task Force for the Niger Delta, comprising the army, navy, air force, SSS (State Security Service) and the mobile police called "Operation Restore Hope". The March 2003 deadly crisis that led to the full and official militarization of the whole of the Niger Delta was purely an economic war turned tribal by 'oil bunkerers' in high and low places. The crisis occurred when some youths working in conjunction with the joint task force to stop oil thieves in the territory of Gbaramatu accosted some navy officers while carrying out the illegal act at the Jones Creek oil fields. Another account has it that the navy accosted a barge being used for bunkering activities and arrested the barge, despite the fact that those concerned had paid bribe to the naval high command in the territory to allow the



trade⁹⁰. Thus, a clash ensued between the navy and the youth, which led to the death of four naval officers, and several youth.. The navy took it for granted that the youth group must be from Okerenkoko community. Hence, Okerenkoko was attacked for more than three days by the Joint Task Force with all its hardware to repeat the Odi saga, but

⁸⁹ Mark Taylor of the US embassy confirmed this development in PortHarcourt in 2003 on his visit to the Niger Delta. The US navy also stepped up its presence in the Gulf of Guinea in the summer of 2006.

⁹⁰For more on the Warri crisis of March 2003, see Human Rights Watch report, 'The Warri crisis: Fuelling Violence' December 2003.

the youth groups fearlessly resisted.. So, when the military noticed that it was impossible to break the resistance by the youth militia, they approached the Itsekiris turned their attention to razing down Izon communities around the creeks of Warri. The Izon youth groups noticing that the military was aided by their Itsekiri neighbors retaliated by destroying identified Itsekiri communities⁹¹. The crisis thus turned tribal and brutal. From this moment, the community of Okerenkoko was considered the strong hold of the Izon militia and marked for possible elimination in military circles. Therefore, the 2006 aerial bombing of Okerenkoko community could not be totally divorced from this thinking. The youth groups in the Gbaramatu territory also formed a formidable alliance and fortified their armories, sensing that the military may return on a later date as in the case of the Odi massacre. In any case, their fears of a military reprisal was confirmed in 2006 about three years after the first unsuccessful raid of March 2003.

The action of the federal government is to get the maximum oil required from the territory with no resistance from the highly impoverished aborigines, hence, the deployment of soldiers and gun boats as mediation strategy into the delta maze of creeks and swamps. Thus, according to Oboko, President of FNDIC:

Perhaps, the priority of Government is to get back to full swing oil operations in the Niger Delta, whereas, the priority of the nationalities of the Niger Delta is, in addition to allowing full oil operations, to secure level playing ground in the practice of democracy; guarantying good governance, liberty, freedom to all citizenry including the Warri Ijaw⁹². (edited formatting and font size).

Part of the financial burden of military deployment is shouldered by Delta, Rivers and Bayelsa states of the Niger Delta. The oil companies also contribute a great measure of resources and logistics for the military personnel posted to oil facilities. The governments of Delta, Bayelsa and Rivers states spend about N250 million (Naira) each every month on the joint task force "Operation restore Hope"⁹³. Some observers have argued that if half the money expended on security by the various governments and multi-national oil companies are diverted to development projects in the Niger Delta the territory would be at peace⁹⁴.

The MEND therefore, if properly analyzed is a consequence of the Okerenkoko attack and killings of 2003, the proliferation of arms by elected officers and politicians in the 2003 elections, the President Olusegun Obasanjo failed Political Reform Conference

⁹¹ The Itsekiri also have their own version of what led to this crisis.

⁹² See FNDIC's position, 'Pathway to the Council, the Ijaw Course', handbook published by FNDIC, May 2006. FNDIC changed its leadership early in the year (2007) with Dennis Otuario and Paul Bebenimibo acting as President and Secretary respectively.

⁹³ This information was given by a government official in Delta state who pleaded anonymity.

⁹⁴ For instance, an October edition of the *Vanguard Newspaper* says the Government and oil companies i.e., the joint venture, have spent about N500 billion (Naira) on the protection of oil installations in the past 5-6 years in the Niger Delta, yet peace in the territory has remained a 'fleeting illusion to be pursued and never attained'. The figure is outrageous compared to the level of abject poverty prevailing in the Niger Delta.

of 2005, and the subsequent arrest of Asari, Alamiyeseigha and other IZONS by the government. All these factors merely ignited the petro-soaked call for resource control and self-determination agitation already near the boiling point to its present unimaginable degree. This much was made clear by MEND's spokesman (Jomo Gbomo) on the attack of the AGIP oil facility (an Italian oil company) in Brass, Bayelsa state, on December 7, 2006. The militia group according to Jomo Gbomo, in view of their "successes against the military gives them cause to review their list of demands"⁹⁵. The demands as stated by the movement include (a) the release of Alamiyeseigha, Asari and all Niger Delta prisoners held on the account of MEND's fight for justice, (b) payment by oil companies to communities affected by oil spillages one time or the other due to their sub-standard work practices in the Niger Delta, (c) complete forfeiture by the Nigerian Government of its interest in the oil industry to local communities, (d) payment of reparation to the entire Niger Delta for 50 years of robbery and enslavement by the oil companies and the government⁹⁶.



The ruling elites at the center in Nigeria had the rare privilege to change things for the better with the 2003 election. Instead, the elections were massively rigged and results concocted by the ruling PDP party and its collaborators in and outside government in all the Niger Delta states. Thus, the peoples of the delta were once again

⁹⁵ *Vanguard Newspaper*, Lagos, December 8, 2006.

⁹⁶For these conditions and other details see *Vanguard Newspaper*, Lagos, December 8, 2006. Also during the attack four expatriate oil workers were taken as guests (hostages), they are; Francese Arena, Cosma Russo, Roberto Dieghi (all Italian) and a Lebanon, Imad Saliba .

denied of credible, efficient and able representation in government at various levels.. Consequently, in the Niger Delta and most parts of Nigeria, criminals, looters and persons of questionable character gained access to policy making and state institutions aided by multi-national oil companies⁹⁷. Thus, in Ike Okonta's opinion the current scenario is,

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 and oil company agents, thereby narrowing the civic options of those who refused to be co-opted. In desperation, elements of the latter group embraced the AK47 to seek redress⁹⁸. (edited formatting and font size)

Shortly after the elections in 2003, Alhaji Dokobo-Asari who had worked closely with the government of Rivers state, fell-out with Peter Odili, the Governor of Rivers State for criticizing the conduct of the election as fraudulent and unacceptable⁹⁹. This is how the crises pendulum in the delta swung temporarily from Warri to Port Harcourt in 2003 and 2004, involving Alhaji Dokubo-Asari's Niger Delta Peoples Volunteer Force (NDPVF) and the state government on one hand, and Asari and Ateke Tom on the other. It is reasoned in some quarters that Ateke's Niger Delta Vigilante (NDV) was a paramilitary conceptualized, nurtured and funded by the government to launch military campaign against the Asari phenomenon in the state¹⁰⁰. The Ateke group and Asari's NDPVF engaged each other in fierce battles in the creeks and riverine communities of the southeast and southwest of Port Harcourt, the capital city of rivers state. Despite violent clashes that ensued between these groups, the Nigerian military often looked the other way. Many young souls were lost and innocent persons were killed and a lot of property, livelihood and communities were destroyed. The crisis shifted to the city of Port Harcourt by late August 2004; the Amadi-ama territory and Marine Base areas were under constant attack and counter-attack by youth loyal to Dokubo Asari and Ateke, using all available weapons of elimination. Before now, Dokubo-Asari and Ateke Tom had been declared wanted by the police in Rivers state. Also, President Olusegun Obasanjo had instructed that Asari's NDPVF be wiped out by the military in early September 2004. Thus, Asari who inhabited the creeks since the crisis started declared an "all out war" against the Nigerian state and the multi-national corporations operating in the creeks of the Niger Delta. He threatened to blow up pipelines, flow stations, rigs criss-crossing the creeks and disrupt all oil activities in the delta of Nigeria.

⁹⁷ For more on the elections of 2003 and the involvement of the oil companies in the Niger Delta see Ijaw Council for Human Rights (ICHR) Report, "Ballots of Blood: PDP Primaries in Bayelsa State", 2002.

⁹⁸ Ike Okonta, 'Behind the Mask: Explaining the Emergence of the MEND Militia in Nigeria's Oil-Bearing Niger Delta', *Pambazuka News*, 2006.

⁹⁹ For more on the Asari saga see International Crisis Group reports, 'The Swamps of Insurgency: Nigeria's Delta Unrest, No. 115, August 2006, 'Fuelling the Niger Delta Crisis, No. 118, September 2006

¹⁰⁰ Dokubo-Asari was the first national Vice-President of IYC, and later became the President in a controversial election which many believe never held. This was the period he was said to be patronized by the Governor and other political leaders in the state. The Rivers State Commissioner for Information was said to have conceded to the close relationship with the militant leader when he said that Asari "worked with us" before the 2003 elections.

The threat by Asari caused a major shake-up in the oil industry with the price of oil skyrocketing in the world market, while at home SPDC and other multi-nationals began the withdrawal of personnel from oil fields cutting oil output by about 40,000 bpd. In early October, for fear of Asari's threat, the federal government called for peace by flying Dokubo-Asari and Ateke Tom for a peace meeting at the insistence of the President. The President gave amnesty to the militant leaders and their disciples and asked that they submit weapons in their disposal to the government and be paid. The militia leaders returned to Port Harcourt triumphantly, submitted their weapons as agreed and received the cash. This was the buy back deal struck by the government and the militia.

After the Abuja peace initiative and the arms buy back deal, Asari joined hands with other Nigerian activists from the north, west, east and the south under the banner of Pro-National Conference (PRONACO)¹⁰¹. On the 17th of September 2005, the most successful PRONACO meeting was held in Port Harcourt. The meeting hosted by NDPVF, Chikoko movement and the Ijaw Republican Assembly (IRA) among others was attended by people from the north, east, south and the west. Before the meeting, security agents requested that Asari suspend the meeting, but he and others insisted that the meeting must hold. On the day of the meeting about ten truckloads of mobile policemen were stationed outside the Aldgate Hotel in PortHarcourt. He was soon thereafter arrested on 20th September 2005, since then incarcerated and charged with treason¹⁰².

The arrest of Dokubo-Asari and his incarceration since 20th September 2005 has been interpreted by his followers and mostly militant youths of the delta, as a betrayal of trust with regard to the Abuja accord on the part of the federal government of Nigeria. Before the arrest of Dokubo-Asari, Chief D.S.P Alamiyeseigha, the Governor of Bayelsa state (the only Izon state in Nigeria) had been arrested in London by the British Police over allegations of money laundering. Also, at the same time, at home in Nigeria Chief Ebitimi Banigo a former Minister of Science and Technology in Olusegun Obasanjo's first tenure was arrested and his Bank (Allstates Trust Bank Plc) crippled by the government. Thus, three pillars of the Izon nation were pulled down the same time, popularly interpreted as an act against the Izon nation because of the Izon struggle/conflict/violence and frontline clamor for resource control and self-determination. Prior to his arrest, Dobuko Asari was rightly or wrongly perceived as a

¹⁰¹ Anthony Enahoro and Wole Soyinka are the leaders of this group. Asari was an influential member from the south-south and a voice to be reckoned with in PRONACO activities. PRONACO was to organize a people's conference to decide the future of Nigeria and the various ethnic nationalities by representatives of the people selected by the people. This was the same period the Presidential Political Reform Conference failed with the south-south delegates walking out of the conference due to disagreement on derivation and lack of consensus among members.

¹⁰² Other alleged separatist movement leaders in West and East of Nigeria were also arrested in October 2005, such as Gani Adams a factional leader of the Yoruba separatist movement, Odua Peoples Congress (OPC), Fredrick Fasheun (now released on health grounds) also a factional leader of OPC and Ralph Uwazuruike of the Igbo Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra. They have been charged like Asari by the Nigerian state for the offense of treason.

military support of the Izon nation. Ebitimi Banigo was regarded as the economic power base with many Izens under his employment, while Alamieyeseigha, a political torchbearer, was regarded as 'Governor General' of the Izon nation. Therefore, most observers could not possibly reconcile why the military, economic and political power holders in the Izon nation would be castrated at the same time.. Others considered these happenings as an insult and an invitation for the Izon nation to enter into war with the federal government—as the Izon territories were excessively militarized. While perhaps the federal government was justified, they were misunderstood by some of the citizenry, especially the militants in Izon land and the Niger Delta

However, in November and December of 2005, things began to deteriorate when an unknown militant group using dynamite in parts of Rivers state blew up two SPDC oil pipelines. On the 11th of January 2006, an SPDC oil field located about twenty kilometers offshore was attacked by militants and four expatriate oil workers taken hostage after a heavy gun battle between the rebels and the military guarding the oil field¹⁰³. Again, on Sunday January 15, 2006 militants “attacked and destroyed one flow station and two military house boats in Benisede, Bayelsa state”¹⁰⁴. According to Jomo Gbomo, the aim of MEND, which later claimed responsibility for the attacks, “is to totally destroy the capacity of the Nigerian government to export oil”¹⁰⁵. The government in her reaction deployed several gun-boats and military men to the creeks and oil facilities in the delta to quell and exterminate the militants with logistical support from the oil companies. The military deployed to quell the situation, according to MEND statement, were merely involved in the persecution, arrest of innocent civilians and the attack of Izon villages/hamlets¹⁰⁶. The security condition in the Niger Delta, especially the Gbaramatu axis deteriorated with no sign of improvement due to the constant clashes between the military and MEND in the creeks. This veiled movement increased the number of successful attacks against the military and TNCs thereby

¹⁰³ The military was overpowered by the militants and even an SPDC chartered military reinforcement could not stand the fire power and shelling of the militants. Pipelines belonging to SPDC were blown up in the territory. The four expatriates taken hostage after the incident were; Patrick Arnold of USA, Nichev Milko of Bulgaria, Nigel Watson of UK and Harry Ebanks of Honduras. The hostages work for Wilbros, a contracting firm to SPDC. Also, this incident was followed by a rise in the price of oil at the international market. The hostages (guests) were released to FNDIC (the unofficial negotiating body) at the end of January and handed over to the government.

¹⁰⁴ Jomo Gbomo the official spokesman of MEND in an email to journalists attributed the various attacks since November to the new MEND movement. The statement from MEND claimed that several military men were wasted in the encounter and therefore, warn oil workers and the military to leave the Niger Delta or face the wrought of the militants. SPDC specifically was advised to leave the Niger Delta territory due to its connivance with the government in impoverishing the people of the territory. MEND had earlier after the destruction of the SPDC offshore EA oil field stated there demands as, the immediate and unconditional release of Dokubo Asari, Alamieyeseigha and the withdrawal of SPDC from the Niger Delta territory. Benisede is in the border between Bayelsa and Delta state.

¹⁰⁵ Jomo Gbomo in the press statement after the destruction of Benisede flow station in Bayelsa. The threat to an extent has been effective because the militants have since February stopped operations cutting short about 400,000 bpd.

¹⁰⁶ For more on the activities of security forces see Amnesty International Report of 28 November 2006 on Nigeria, “Rape: The Silent Weapon” , www.web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGAFR440202006. Since the Ogoni saga security men have been operating recklessly without caution; intimidating innocent citizens, beating, raping women and children and even killing without provocation.

paralyzing oil activities in the Gbaramatu territory of Warri and some parts of the delta. The incessant attacks and reprisals led to the convocation of a Special Niger Delta Consultative Forum to find plausible solutions to the raging war in the creeks of the delta, established by the Bayelsa State Government and the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC), facilitated by Niger Delta Peace and Security Strategy (PaSS) held in Yenagoa¹⁰⁷. The two-day forum organized for the oil producing states of the delta was attended by Senators, Ministers, Governors, Deputy Governors, Commissioners, oil company officials, representatives of foreign governments, representatives of developmental agencies, representatives of the military and security services, traditional rulers, women and youth. Also in attendance were leading youth and women activists and community leaders.



After exhaustive deliberation, some observations from the forum which was held on the 10th and 11th of February 2006 were that: “the recent crisis has again brought to focus the need for urgent attention to the problems of the Niger Delta, the need to contend with issues associated with environmental degradation, lack of opportunities for participation in the oil industry....recent disregard of the Niger Delta issues at the Political reform Conference”, that “federal, state and intervention agencies have not shown enough commitment and determination in addressing the problems of the Niger Delta” and that “escalation of tension in the Niger Delta is the result of

¹⁰⁷ PaSS was founded by a network of three organisations working on conflict in the delta; Academic Associates PeaceWorks (AAPW), Our Niger Delta (OND) and the International Centre for Reconciliation (ICR). ICR has since withdrawn its membership of the network. The network is an interventionist agency in the delta on conflict management, mediation and sustainable development.

deployment of troops”¹⁰⁸. After plenary and interactive sessions, the forum unanimously agreed on some key resolutions as the way forward for the Niger Delta which include but are not limited to the following: “the Niger Delta be declared a special developmental area, the federal government should show greater political will and dedication to the Niger Delta problems, the oil companies should review their employment and work policies to favor the delta and be transparent, the syndicate involved in pipeline vandalizing, hostage taking and other acts of instability are to exercise restraint and total cease fire, the government should release Dokubo-Asari and his lawyer Uche Okwukwu immediately, the federal government was asked to withdraw the military troops from the delta to allow for community leaders more roles in building peace, and also that all stakeholders should rededicate themselves to the pursuit of peace, development, progress and regular dialogue in the Niger Delta”¹⁰⁹. The conference ended on Saturday 11th of February 2006, with the formal adoption of the Communiqué by participants. Participants, especially those from the local oil-bearing communities of the Niger Delta left Yenagoa, the venue of the forum, believing that the problems of the region will be resolved sooner than later and expected dividends from oil.

However, just six days after the forum, precisely Friday 15th February 2006, military aircrafts were deployed hovering over the territory of Okerenkoko and its surrounding communities emitting from above explosives and shooting indiscriminately into communities. According to MEND spokesman Jomo Gbomo, the aircrafts used for the attacks took off from Osubi airstrip in Warri, a civilian airfield belonging to SPDC. The military’s aerial bombardment on the communities of Seigbene, Perezuoweikorigbene, Ukpogbene and Seitorububor of Gbaramatu continued on the 17th and was repeated on the 18th. In the attack about 20 innocent civilians were said to have lost their lives. The federal government in its response to the bombardments claimed that the military was merely attacking barges aurally in the territory of Okerenkoko that were being used by oil smugglers¹¹⁰. Immediately after the attack by the military on the 18th, the MEND militants responded to the ‘call for self-defense’ by mobilizing and storming SPDC’s Forcados terminal which is more of a garrison, at about 2:45am in the night of Saturday (early morning of Sunday). The militants carried out a series of attacks around the Forcados terminal, setting fire to available tankers, blowing up pipelines and the loading point. The militants during the attack also took nine expatriates of Wilbros (SPDC’s contractor) as hostages¹¹¹. Thus, in Gbaramatu and

¹⁰⁸ See Communiqué of the Yenagoa Accord; Special Niger Delta Consultative Forum held in Bayelsa 10 – 11th February 2006. See Appendix for the Yenagoa Accord.

¹⁰⁹ See ‘The Way Forward’ in Communiqué of the Yenagoa Accord.

¹¹⁰ The Grand Commander of MEND, Mr Ebidouwei Amatoru (not real name) interviewed on the 2nd of August 2006, at the Warri Central Hospital says the attack was directed at the Okerenkoko community due to the resistance of 2003. Since the military could not successfully enter into the community by water they decided this time around to use aerial bombardment. He claimed that it took the MEND militants some time to retaliate because they had laid down their arms after the Yenagoa Accord believing that the government was sincere and trustworthy.

¹¹¹ In an interview with the Grand Commander of MEND in Warri on the 2nd of August during the burial of the Nine killed during the Letugbene saga. He argues that the movement has the power to stop all oil operations in the delta but has refused to do so because it believes in dialogue. The hostages were later

other territories of the delta the lion was awoken by the military attacks. MEND claimed the nine hostages were taken as human protection to stop further attacks by the government of Izon communities in Gbaramatu, and immediately after the hostages were taken and dispersed among communities of Gbaramatu, the bombing stopped. The spokesman of MEND, in response to why they take hostages has this to say,

It is no longer news to Nigerians that the Niger Delta is the most underdeveloped place in Nigeria in spite of the wealth daily ploughed from the region. However, this open secret has been carefully guarded by the government of several western nations from their citizens. The numerous atrocities committed by Shell have been concealed so oil can flow¹¹².

The aircraft bombardments of Okerenkoko and its surrounding region and the deployment of more gun-boats and military detachments into the creeks of the Niger Delta have not in any way curtailed violent agitations, but instead have exacerbated political militancy in the whole of the Niger Delta.

In April 2006, the group also carried out two bombings, one at Bori camp military barracks in Port Harcourt and the other at a petrol tanker garage in Warri. The attacks were described as not only “strategic” but “symbolic” and to show that the military used by the oil companies to protect their facilities and personnel was incapable of protecting even their own¹¹³. The President in his response declared a total crackdown of the militants by the military as against his earlier stand that the Niger Delta crisis will be addressed through dialogue with the militants rather than war.

The President had actually in the heat of the crisis called for dialogue, and held a meeting with peoples of the Niger Delta¹¹⁴. After the meeting in May 2006, the President acknowledged the deplorable situation of the Delta and announced the formation of the Council on Social and Economic Development of the Coastal States (COSEDECS). The President also announced that the East-West road will be split (The East-West Road is the only road that links the Niger Delta states and connects the delta to other parts of the Nigerian State). The Government also directed that citizens of the delta should be recruited into the armed forces to ease the teeming unemployment in the territory. The last gesture was seen by most observers and youth of the Niger delta as an attempt by the Federal Government to recruit and train youth from the Niger

released unhurt and well treated in batches with the last three released on the 27th of March, more than one month after they were taken from Forcados terminal.

¹¹² Jomo Gbomo, MEND's official spokesman in an email to journalists.

¹¹³ Jomo Gbomo in an email sent to the media after the bombings of April 2006. The group also carried out two bombing at the SPDC residential area and AGIP in November 2006, and a third one was undertaken near the Rivers State Government House Port Harcourt in December 2006. The group has warned that it is taking the fight to the cities.

¹¹⁴ The Presidential council meeting was boycotted by the Izens. The decision to boycott the meeting was made public by the Izen national leader Chief E.K Clark. The reason being that the Izen nation has a peculiar problem and will want to discuss with the President as a distinct entity in order to table their grievances. The meeting was attended by some Izens who were not seen as representing the Izen ethnic nationality.

Delta in military warfare and re-deploy some to the maze of creeks in the territory. The men of the armed forces presently sent to curtail the unrest in the creeks of the delta are either inexperienced swimmers or those not acquainted with the marshy terrain. Hence, the need to recruit and train youth from the territory is considered very vital in Government circles.

The President, Olusegun Obasanjo decided to use force to pacify the aggrieved youths of the delta instead of his earlier promise of dialogue as an option. Thus, in August the President instructed again that the Joint Task Force (JTF) commanders and other ranks in the delta territory should adopt the option of force to pacify the resistant youth and to see that the oil companies are back to business as usual. Immediately after the order by the President, the Martyr's Brigade, the Niger Delta Peoples Volunteer Force (NDPVF), Coalition for Militant Action in the Niger Delta (COMA) and MEND also announced the formation of a Coalition of Militants called the Joint Revolutionary Council (JRC) with a view to uniting the various groups against the declaration by the President and to intensify their agitation¹¹⁵.

On the 20th of August 2006, a few days after the Presidential declaration of force pacification of agitation in the Niger delta, about 15 IZONS were said to have been ambushed and massacred by men of the Joint Task Force (JTF). The IZONS were returning from Letugbene after the rescue of an SPDC staff taken into custody by the inhabitants of Letugbene for the companies' refusal to honor an MoU with the community. The SPDC staff (Nelson Ujeya from Delta State) and nine youth from delta state were also murdered in the attack.

In the Septemberth 2006 press statement during the burial of the nine youth from Delta state, more than 5,000 persons—youth, men, women and other sympathizers across the delta the Warri Central Hospital attended. The murder was attributed by FNDIC to the massive aerial security attacks undertaken on February 15, 17 and 18, the subsequent mass action of reprisal and the disruption of SPDC operations¹¹⁶.

However, before the press statement by FNDIC was presented, the crowd was first addressed by Dan Ekpebide (FNDIC's then Chief Adviser and a Leader in Gbaramatu). Ekpebide stressed the need for the youth to exercise restraint and be calm in the face of provocation and enjoined all youth to be law abiding as a last respect to the fallen heroes of the delta. He noted however that Gbaramatu had never in her history in the struggle had it so bad that nine of her citizens be killed the same day. FNDIC attributed the killings to SPDC when it said:

Vanity was it when well over 15 IZON persons were in an avoidable mass murder plotted/set-up by SPDC and gruesomely killed/executed by

¹¹⁵ Jomo Gbomo the official spokesman of MEND responded to the formation of the group saying he has no knowledge of COMA and described Marty's Brigade as 'Imaginary'.

¹¹⁶ FNDIC Press Statement delivered on September 2, 2006 by Oboko Bello during the burial Ceremony of Nine out of the men killed by the JTF.

military men in the service of Shell Petroleum Development Company Nigeria Limited (SPDC)¹¹⁷. (font/formatting edited).



The FNDIC posited that the youths embarked on the journey to Letugbene because they were invited to intervene in the hostage crisis when it became clear that the state and federal government could not resolve the crisis. According to FNDIC, on the 18th of August 2006, FNDIC was mandated by the Ijaw Interactive Assembly to intervene with her “positive youthful resources to redeem the ugly situation of the Ijawland including the Letugbene hostage saga”¹¹⁸. FNDIC also alleged that:

Separately and at different times top government functionaries (State and Federal) and officials of SPDC including Messer. Edesiri, S Baba, Rev. O.J. Agbara, the MD SPDC, the Commander JTF, Warri and Chief of Army staff, Abuja contacted FNDIC leadership calling for assistance towards releasing the SPDC personnel on hostage in the Letugbene area of Bayelsa State¹¹⁹. (formatting/font size edited)

¹¹⁷ *Ibid*

¹¹⁸ *Ibid*

¹¹⁹ *Ibid*

The murdered youths and others were said to have been sent as a call to duty towards making sure the man was released. The names of the nine youths from Delta state (all IZONS) killed were given as:

Victim's Name	Community
1. Dipio Tonme	Ayakoromo
2. Theophilus Febebe	Ekogbene
3. Defele Arogbo	Kolegbene
4. Leftery Oguma	Oporoza
5. Igangan Wayan	Ogbe-Ijoh
6. Stanley Eduobo	Blaibiri
7. Yaya Captain	Kurutie
8. Isaac Kpenfe	Kunukunuma
9. Tamarabideke June	Torugbene



The nine coffins containing the corpses were displayed during the press briefing and were then taken to the corpses were taken to their respective communities for burial amidst crying and wailing. Some of the youth however, vowed to retaliate the killings at the appropriate time saying, “SPDC’s day will surely come”. The crowd was reminded by Oboko Bello that the murdered youth were heroes who died in active

service for the Izon nation and not hostage takers, hence, their bodies were released by the government to their families so as to give them a befitting burial.

The killings of Letugbene truncated an earlier SPDC initiated re-entry program into the Gbaramatu territory with FNDIC representing Gbaramatu. Earlier SPDC officials and FNDIC had jointly embarked on a “Joint Investigation Verifications (JIV) exercise to Ijaw communities in both Delta and Bayelsa States most peacefully and without problems before the killing”¹²⁰. The JIV was working on the modalities for SPDC’s re-entry and subsequent oil operations when 15 persons were killed and immediately the parley was suspended.

In a very brief discussion with the Grand Commander of MEND at the Warri Central Hospital where the press briefing occurred, he made it very clear that the demands of MEND are not separate from the agitations and demands tabled before the Nigerian State by Isaac Boro and Ken Saro-Wiwa and that until the demands of the IZONS of Warri for political, social and economic well-being and that the people of the Niger Delta gain resource control and self-determination are actualized, there may not be any peace in sight for the operating oil firms in the Niger Delta. The Grand Commander also asserted that MEND has the capacity and manpower to stop all oil activities in the Niger Delta but has been restrained due to appeals by well meaning IZONS and other Nigerians. Ebidouwei Amatoru (not real name), the Grand Commander of MEND says, “MEND is a resistance philosophy which no amount of suppression, repression and intimidation from any quarter can stop, conquer or kill”¹²¹.

The crisis concerning the Gbaramatu clan is the articulation and expression of previous socio-economic and political issues by a conglomeration of movements within and around Gbaramatu and the Niger Delta in order to combat the wrongs embedded in the distorted Nigerian federalism. Until the reports of the various commissions set up by governments at various levels are revisited and the recommendations implemented, we are bound to witness unlimited violence in Warri and its greater region.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

¹²¹ The Grand Commander of MEND during an interview at the burial ceremony at the Warri Central Hospital, September 2006.



CONCLUSION

The on-going conflict rocking Gbaramatu cannot be totally divorced from the political, economic, and social deprivation ravaging the territory and Niger Delta in general. The crisis is the angry outburst of years of neglect, deprivation, poverty and environmental abuses orchestrated by the various governments and the transnational oil corporations operating in the Niger Delta.

The crisis has greatly affected the inflow of resources into the Nigerian federation. This is evidenced by the Federal Government disclosure in January 2007 that "Nigeria lost an estimated N570 billion (Five Hundred and Seventy Billion Naira) in revenue in the year 2006 alone due to militant activities in the Niger Delta"¹²². Also the militancy witnessed in the oil-rich Niger Delta since January 2006, has led to the attack and destruction of many oil installations. In the same vein, more than 50 expatriate oil workers were abducted (most of them have since been released unharmed, while some are still in the militants' custody) and many Nigerians have been killed.

In November 2006 for instance, SPDC facility in Oporoma, Bayelsa state, was attacked by a group which called itself the Niger Delta Freedom fighters (NDFF). During the attack a soldier, a cook and an administrative officer of the company were taken hostage and oil equipment vandalized. The dust had yet to settle when another group attacked a Total Oil facility in Obagi, Rivers State, killing three policemen on guard and leaving four workers of the oil firm critically injured. The same group (MEND) that claimed responsibility for the Obagi incident invaded an AGIP Oil company facility and abducted four expatriate oil workers. The group(s) demands since the crisis started early in 2006, is the immediate release of Alhaji Dokubo Asari (Leader of the Niger Delta Volunteer Force) and D.S.P Alamieyeseigha (former Governor of Bayelsa state) by the Federal Government.

Recent pronouncements however, show that the situation in the delta may deteriorate. The Vice President, Alhaji Atiku Abubakar, while commissioning his campaign headquarters in Abuja on the 30th of January 2007, made a sorrowful revelation when he said, "the Obasanjo administration, a few weeks ago, approved \$2 billion (N260 billion) to buy weapons to fight militancy in the Niger Delta"¹²³. The Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) promptly responded to the revelation saying, "We're prepared for war"¹²⁴. The movement stated further that the action of the President shows insincerity in the part of the Government towards an amicable resolution of the Niger delta crisis¹²⁵.

¹²² *Thisday Newspaper*, Lagos, February 4, 2007, p. 38.

¹²³ *Vanguard Newspaper*, Lagos, February 1, 2007. The allegation has since been denied by the Presidency and the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), p. 15.

¹²⁴ *Vanguard Newspaper*, Lagos, February 1, p. 15.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, p.7.

The audacious activities of MEND before and after the Letugbene killings have not abated. Instead the agitations and militancy by aggrieved youth, supporters and allies of MEND have only demonstrated their courage and capacity in the destruction of oil facilities in Bayelsa and Rivers States and taking some oil workers 'hostage'¹²⁶. The creeks of the delta have been overtaken by militant youth who have lost faith in an amicable resolution of the crisis between the Nigerian State and the oil companies . And with the government unable to articulate or organize a coherent response, an atmosphere of uncertainty pervades the area.

¹²⁶ Oil facility belonging to AGIP Oil Company at Brass in Bayelsa State was destroyed in early December 2006 and four expatriate workers of the company taken into custody by the militants: one of the hostages was released only in January due to ill health. There were attacks and counter-attacks between the militants and the Joint Task Force in Rivers State in November and December, 2006.

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APPENDIX I

THE YENAGOA ACCORD

A Communiqué issued at the end of the Special Niger Delta Consultative Forum Held at Yenagoa, Bayelsa State from the 10th to 11th of February 2006.

Participants were drawn from Representatives of Federal and State Governments of the Niger Delta (Bayelsa, Delta, Edo, Ondo, Rivers, Akwa Ibom and Cross Rivers State), Representatives of the oil companies (ENI – NAOC, Chevron, NLNG, Brass LNG, SPDC), Representatives of Foreign Governments (U.S.A, British, French, South African and the Dutch) and Development Agencies including the Niger Delta Development Commission NDDC and UNDP, Representatives of the Niger Delta communities (elders, traditional rulers, women and youth).

The Forum was declared open by the Senate President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (represented by Senator J.K. Brambaifa) and had in attendance the Executive Governor of Bayelsa State, Dr. Goodluck Jonathan as well as the Deputy Governors of Bayelsa, Delta, Edo and Rivers States; and the Commissioner of Works, Lands and Housing Ondo State who represented the Governor of Ondo State. Also in attendance were senior members of the Federal Government, which include members of the National Assembly, the Minister of State for Defence, the Minister of State for Petroleum Resources, the Group Managing Director of Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC) and Senior Representatives of NNPC joint venture companies. Others include Representatives of the Military and Security Services. The people of the Niger Delta, leading Youth and Women activists, Community Leaders and traditional rulers.

The Forum was held against the background of the recent hostage crisis in the Niger Delta and was intended to create a platform for frank discussions to proffer practical solutions to the problems of the Niger Delta.

The participants made various observations including:

1. The recent hostage crisis has again brought to focus the need for urgent attention to the problems of the Niger Delta, for example the resurgence of youth resistance, vandalizing of oil installations and insecurity
2. There is absolute need to contend with issues associated with environmental degradation, lack of opportunities for participation in the oil industry, lack of employment opportunities in the oil industries even for jobs that do not require specialized technical skills, lack of proper political participation as evinced by the recent disregard of Niger Delta issues at the National Political conference.

3. The brazen insensitivity of the Federal Government and oil industry operators to the developmental needs of the Niger Delta particularly the non-dualisation of the East West Road, (traversing Cross Rivers, Akwa Ibom, Rivers, Bayelsa, Delta & Edo States) amongst others.
4. That the Federal Government, State Government, Intervention Agencies (NDDC), our Local Governments have not shown enough commitment and determination in addressing the problems of the Niger Delta.
5. The two tiers of Government of the Niger Delta themselves have not created the enabling environment in such areas as good governance, prudent and transparent management of resources and infrastructural development to attract complimentary development from the oil industry.
6. Escalation of tension in the Niger Delta as a result of deployment of troops.
7. The need to redouble efforts on issues related to women and their empowerment, being the most vulnerable group at times of crisis in the Niger Delta.

Arising from the two days of discussions, which included plenary and interactive sessions, **THE WAY FORWARD** for the Niger Delta was identified as follows –

1. That due to its environmental peculiarity and economic importance to the entire world, the Niger Delta should be declared a **SPECIAL DEVELOPMENTAL AREA** that must receive the attention of the Federal Government of Nigeria and the International Community.
2. That the Federal Government must show greater political will and dedication to the problems of the Niger Delta.
3. That the international community especially government and donor agencies from countries with economic interests in the Niger Delta **MUST**, as a matter of urgency now come in and show practical interest in the development of the area.
4. That oil companies, must as a matter of urgency, review their recruitment policies by taking on board qualified persons from the Niger Delta. In particular, the Human Resources Manager and the External Relations Officer or their equivalents.
5. That operating oil companies must quarterly publish their employment statistics for public knowledge as a way of monitoring compliance with the above decision.
6. That oil companies, must as a matter of urgency, make pronouncements on their plans for infrastructural development of oil bearing communities in the Niger

Delta. Efforts should be made to integrate their workers with their host communities.

7. That State Governments in the Niger Delta and the NDDC are hereby advised to utilize the available resources prudently for infrastructural development of the Niger Delta.
8. That the Federal and State Governments, oil companies and NDDC are put on notice to desist from the practice of impoverishing the people of the Niger Delta by using mainly non indigenes of the area to execute projects.
9. That the syndicate in the Niger Delta responsible for pipeline vandalizing, hostage taking and other acts of instability must exercise restraint and total ceasefire, to give room for the implementation of development projects.
10. While this Forum believes in the indivisibility of the Federal Republic of Nigeria and the supremacy of the rule of law; this Forum requests that Alhaji Asari Dokubo and Barrister Uche Okwukwu be released immediately.
11. That the Federal Government should immediately consider a program of steady withdrawal of troops from the Niger Delta to allow community leaders play more roles in building peace and restoration of communal confidence.
12. That all stakeholders should rededicate themselves to the pursuit of peace, development, progress and regular dialogue in the Niger Delta.
13. This Forum frowns seriously at the slow pace of the Brass LNG project especially in view of the fast track development of the Olokola LNG project; which has almost stalled the Brass project. Let it be on notice that the Niger Delta people shall not guarantee the supply of gas to the OKLNG if the above scenario is ascertained or confirmed.
14. The NNPC must take immediate steps to implement the Local Content policy with particular emphasis on a **Niger Delta Content** which must not be less than 50% of the total Local Content.
15. That 25% derivation is a minimum demand made by this Forum in the review of the 1999 constitution.
16. That this Forum strongly urges the FG to move the Head Quarters of NNPC and its subsidiaries to any of the states in the Niger Delta just like the FG succeeded in relocating the NPA, NMA and Shippers Council and National Inland Waterways to Lagos and Lokoja; for the ease of operations.
17. That all oil companies operating in the Niger Delta should move their Head Quarters to their major operating bases.

18. That the Federal Government should publish all allottees of oil blocks in Nigeria since the inception of oil operations and this Forum demands a minimum of 50% future oil blocks allocation as a form of inclusion to create a sense of belonging for the people from the Niger Delta.
19. That the activities of the Petroleum Technology Development Fund (PTDF) are at variance with the expectations of the people of the Niger Delta with respect to their scholarship awards. The Forum demands for 50% award of scholarship to the indigenes of the Niger Delta
20. That the three new refineries proposed by the Federal Government should be sighted in the Niger Delta area as a matter of urgency.
21. This forum commends SPDC for partnering with NDDC to construct the road between Ogbia and Nembe which will cost about N 9. 7 billion Naira and we recommend that other oil companies should emulate such initiatives.
22. That this forum hereby sets up a monitoring committee made up of two representatives each from the Niger Delta States, two nominees of all oil companies and NDDC; to ensure the implementation of the decisions of this forum.

11th February 2006.

MEMBERS OF THE IMPLEMENTATION COMMITTEE

BAYELSA STATE

1. Prof. Nelson Brambaifa
2. Dr. Emmanuel Isukul

DELTA STATE

1. Dr. Lucky Akaruese
2. Dr. Pius Esenebe

RIVERS STATE

1. Miabiye Kuromiema
2. Hilda Dokubo

CROSS RIVERS STATE

1. Col Paul Edor Obi (Rtd)
2. Chief Eyo Etim Nyong

AKWA IBOM STATE

1. Dr. Godwin Ikitde
2. Chief Okonkon Okpo J.P

ONDO STATE

1. Hon. D. I. Kekemeke
2. Hon. (Chief) Olusola Oke

EDO STATE

1. Hon (Mrs) Florence Gbinigie Erhabor
2. Senator Daisy Danjuma