

New Wave of Militancy in the Niger Delta

Briefing: July 2016

After the 2015 Presidential elections which saw a peaceful transition of power from incumbent President Goodluck Jonathan to General Muhammadu Buhari, many observers have rightfully expressed optimism for the future of Africa's biggest economy. There is much to be optimistic about. For one, the Boko Haram counter-insurgency campaign has marked significant successes in the Northeast over the last year. However, by contrast in the Niger Delta region, communal, criminal, and election-related violence have been steadily rising. In fact, conflict-related incidents and fatalities in the Niger Delta were higher in the past six months than at any point since the end of the last wave of militancy in 2009.

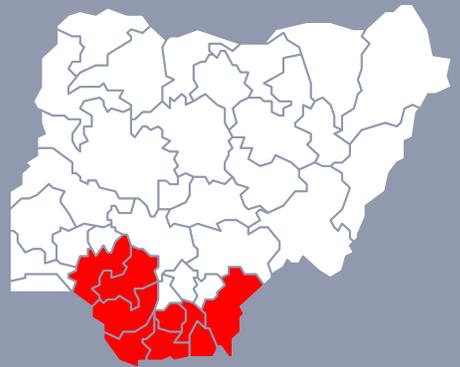
Nowhere has this been more evident in the region than in Rivers, Delta and Bayelsa states, which have recorded the highest per capita fatalities. Amidst the overall levels of insecurity, these states have also witnessed a resurgence of militant groups, who have staged a series of attacks on energy infrastructure. One contributing factor to this surge in violence may be the shaky future of the Presidential Amnesty Program, a staple of the Goodluck Jonathan Vice-Presidency, and later maintained throughout his Presidency. Since the Buhari administration took power in 2015, key security contracts held by ex-militant generals have been cancelled, and plans have been announced to phase out the Amnesty Program that provides stipends and other benefits to ex-militants by 2018.

Although this newest round of militancy may be a power-play for a new round of security contracts and stipends, the stated demands of the militant groups are more expansive. Since bursting onto the scene in February 2016, with a series of attacks on major oil pipelines in Delta and Bayelsa, the Niger Delta Avengers (NDA) has made a deliberate effort to hijack a wide range of local, ethnic, and sectarian interests and demands, in an attempt to cobble together a coalition of the aggrieved. In this, they have had some limited success.

Although the NDA has purported to champion Biafran causes, the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) has unequivocally disavowed them. Also purporting to champion the cause of ex-militant Tompolo, he too has disavowed the NDA, as has the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND). However, a number of ethnic militant groups have pledged allegiance to the NDA including the Red Egbesu Water Lions and the Isoko Liberation Movement.

Meanwhile other militant groups have also become active, with specific demands and agendas. These include the Ultimate Warriors of Niger Delta who have demanded the end to delays of the Export Processing Zone (EPZ) project in the Warri South West Local Government Area (LGA) Delta state.¹ Other groups such as the Joint Niger Delta Liberation Force (JNDLF), have sought to highlight grievances of Ijaw communities.

Niger Delta States, Nigeria



This brief provides an outline of the key militant groups operating in the Niger Delta, and frames how their activities have contributed to deepening insecurity in a region already suffering from economic downturn as a result of commodity prices. Understanding these dynamics is particularly relevant since the beginning of a ceasefire and dialogue between the NDA and Buhari administration announced on 17th June, 2016, which remains tenuous following fresh July militant attacks.

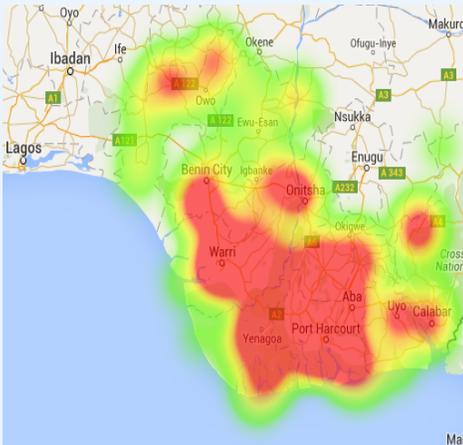
Scope and Limitations: We recognize that the data collected in this project is not an exhaustive tally of all incidents of violence. However, to the extent that data are representative of the patterns and trends, findings are indicated in the report.



Rising Collective Violence

Concentration of Violence in the Niger Delta

December 2015 - April 2016

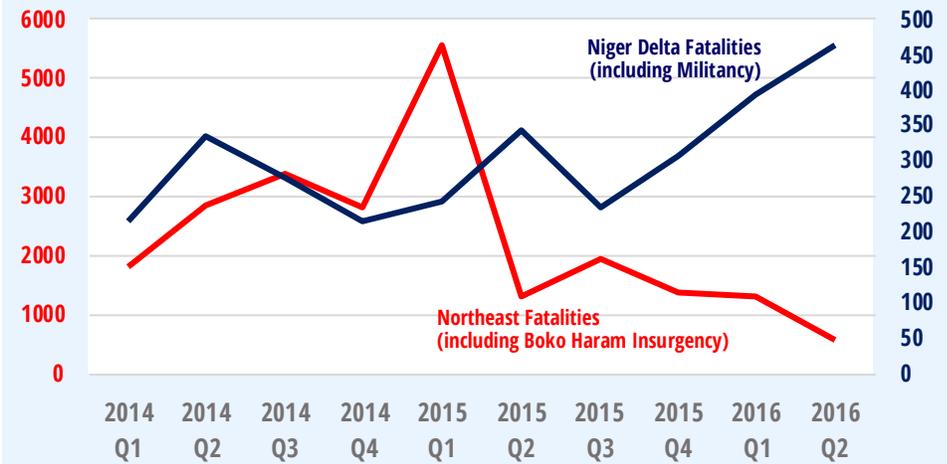


Heat Map: Concentration of conflict incidents between December 2015 and April 2016. This six month period represents the highest number of overall fatalities collectively in Niger Delta states at any time since 2009.

Source: P4P Map; Nigeria Watch and ACLED data

Comparing Boko Haram Insurgency with Niger Delta Militancy

Quarterly Fatalities by Region



The above graph contextualizes the scale of fatalities in the North Eastern states of Nigeria, which continues to battle the Boko Haram insurgency, and the Niger Delta states' militancy. While the overall number of fatalities in the North is significantly more, in recent months the Niger Delta has actually over taken the region as more reported conflict related fatalities.

Data source: Nigeria Watch and ACLED data, triangulated.

Rise in Overall Insecurity

Trends in violence have overwhelmingly shown an increase in conflict incidents and fatalities since November 2015 in the Niger Delta. Of the three most violent states per capita in the region — Rivers, Bayelsa and Delta — the spikes in group grievance and collective violence have coincided with political fragmentation, and a rise in militant activities in the region. The prevalence of — and sometimes interconnectedness between — cult groups, criminality, political violence, and other group-based tensions, has marked an increasingly volatile security situation in the region. Compounding this insecurity is the rise of new militant groups, who have jeopardized oil production

outputs in recent months following a series of attacks on oil infrastructure and equipment.

Amidst the already low commodity prices, and a steep budget deficit faced by the Nigerian federal government, the low socioeconomic conditions that many of the militant groups claim to be fighting against are likely to worsen if Nigeria continues to decrease oil exports as a result of the insecurity. The impacts are not only on a national level, but have affected local businesses and investment in key hubs such as Port Harcourt—as detailed in a recent brief by NDPI and FFP published on Rivers state in June 2016.²

The government's use of the Joint Task

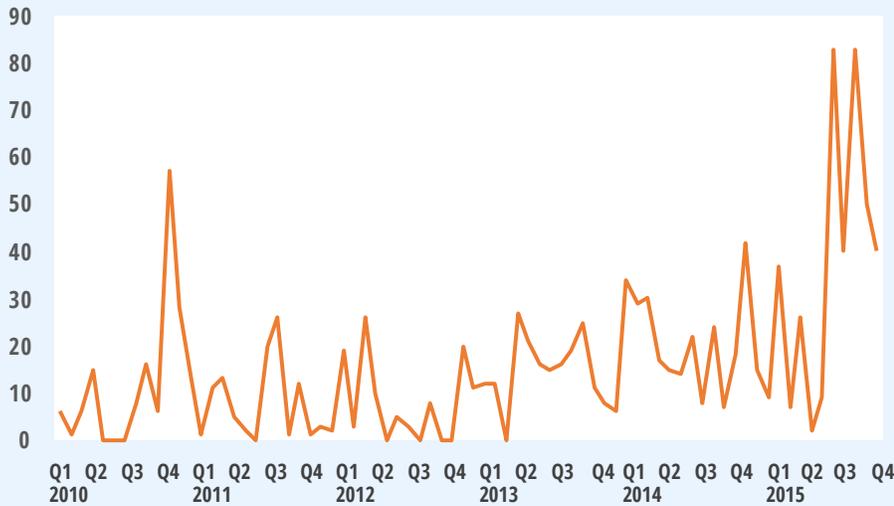
Force (JTF) to counter the regional insecurity has been a point of contention in some areas, with reported clashes between groups and public forces. Alleged abuses by security forces have been reported — with *The Vanguard* and other media outlets widely covering an incident on 28th May 2016 where members of the JTF were accused of looting a sceptre from the Gbaramatu kingdom.

Another prevalent issue exacerbating insecurity is the proliferation of small arms and light weapons in the Niger Delta. In a 2016 paper published by Ugwuja Daniel in the *African Journal of Basic & Applied Sciences* titled 'Proliferation of Light Weapons and Small Arms in West Africa: A Case Study of the Niger Delta of Nigeria',³ findings suggest

1. URL located at: <http://library.fundforpeace.org/conflictbulletin-epz-ugborodo-1505>
 2. URL located at: <http://library.fundforpeace.org/briefing-riverselectionrerun-2016>
 3. URL located at: <http://www.mcser.org/journal/index.php/jesr/article/download/1859/1858>

Group Grievance and Collective Violence Related-Fatalities

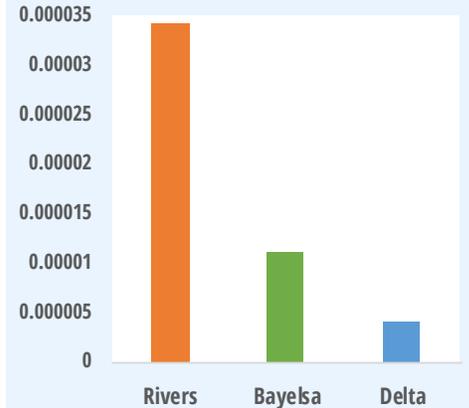
Delta, Rivers, and Bayelsa States



Trend shows fatalities related to group grievance and collective violence—including inter-communal, intra-communal, cult and militancy related violence has risen dramatically since December 2015. Data source: Nigeria Watch www.nigeriawatch.org

Fatalities per Capita (Political, Cult, Communal, Militant Violence)

January-April 2016



Trends in fatalities per capita show the three most violent states as a result of group based conflict in the Niger Delta are the oil-rich Rivers, Bayelsa and Delta. Data source: Nigeria Watch

small arms are exacerbating insecurity in the region. According to the paper, this demand for light weapons is not unrelated to challenges surrounding economic development, employment opportunities, and sustainable alternate livelihoods in the oil-rich region. Daniel notes that that arsenals of weapons, including machine guns, grenade launchers, anti-aircraft missiles, handheld guns and rifles, have been accessed by militants through local manufacturers, politicians during elections, armed forces personnel, and smugglers. Daniel adds that this circulation of illicit weapons has helped advance militant agendas, and led to killings, abductions/kidnappings, oil pipeline vandalism, bunkering and armed robbery.

Daniel's paper also raises the important question of "when and where can we draw the line between militancy and criminality?" This is particularly salient in the context of the Presidential Amnesty Program, which has encouraged militants to participate in vocational training, in addition to stipends in exchange for disarmament.

The new wave of militancy — of which it is unclear to what extent ex-militants and cult groups active in the 2000's are involved — poses a serious dilemma for the Buhari administration on the future of the existing program. It also raises questions about how the government approaches criminal violence and insecurity, in contrast to militant attacks to further specific agendas, which are often not clear cut.

Many of the grievances ostensibly championed by the militant groups are the same underlying issues identified in Daniel's paper, which continue to spur arms proliferation and violence. The lack of economic opportunities and sustainable livelihoods in the region, especially for youth, has contributed to an environment in which criminality and collective violence is tacitly legitimized. This has also been compounded by inter-communal and intra-communal violence and election-related tensions at the local government area (LGA) level — particularly in Rivers, Bayelsa and Delta states.

Key Militant Groups in the Niger Delta

Niger Delta Avengers (NDA)

- Emerged February 2016
- Appeals to a broad range of grievances across multiple ethnic and sectarian groups
- Behind attacks on oil pipelines

The NDA have made international headlines in recent months, following a series of strategic attacks on oil infrastructure, coupled with public demands disseminated via their own website and twitter feed. The NDA has focused on issues associated with oil revenue distribution, as well as tapping into broader group-based grievances within the region. For example, NDA appears to have attempted to align with multiple ethnic group grievances including Ijaw, Igbo, Isoko, and Ogoni causes. In many of their demands released online, they list support of the Biafra movement, and have requested the unfreezing of ex-militant leader Tompolo's bank accounts. Also in their list of demands has been the continuation of building the Maritime University in Okerenkoko, Delta state, which is located on land within the Ijaw Gbaramatu Kingdom.

While peace talks have commenced between the NDA and the Nigerian Government in late June 2016, the NDA has since claimed responsibility for new attacks on oil installations in Delta state in July 2016. In response to these claims broadcasted via social media, Twitter suspended the NDA's account.

Red Egbesu Water Lions

- Declared allegiance to NDA
- Predominately Ijaw

Thought to have emerged around May 2016, the predominately Ijaw militant group has expressed a goal of zero production of oil/gas in the region. According to the Terrorism Research and Analysis Consortium (TRAC), it is unclear whether the group is linked to the cult group named Egbesu Mightier Fraternity of Izon Land and the Water Lions. The group has carried out attacks in Delta and Bayelsa states on oil infrastructure, and declared allegiance to the NDA.

Isoko Liberation Movement

- Declared allegiance to NDA
- Predominately Isoko

Emerging at a similar time to the Red Egbesu Water Lions, the Isoko Liberation Movement has declared the goal of the disintegration of the Nigerian state. Their ultimatum to the federal government of "peaceful disintegration or war" on the 19th May as quoted in The Trent online and other media sources, fed into the allied causes of the NDA and Red Egbesu Water Lions. One of the key demands of the group was the release of the Director of Radio Biafra and leader of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) Kanu Nnamdi, who was arrested in October 2015.

New Delta Suicide Squad (NDSS)

- Targets private oil equipment firms

The NDSS, emerging in May 2016, has announced its goal is to attack equipment used by private oil firms. In a statement released on 31st May, as reported in The Whistler paper, the NDSS made threats to target tank farms, storage tanks and private jetties. Their expressed grievances come from "economic exploitation" in the region, and have demanded the release of Azibaola Roberts, the cousin of former President Goodluck Jonathan, who was arrested by the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission on charges of corruption.

Joint Niger Delta Liberation Force (JNDLF)

- Supports Ijaw communities in Bayelsa

Like many of the militant groups, the JNDLF emerged in 2016. Focused on grievances associated with Ijaw communities in Bayelsa state, according to TRAC the group's goal is to create a separate nation from Nigeria.

Ultimate Warriors of Niger Delta

- *Predominately Ijaw*
- *Aggrieved by delays in key Delta business projects*

The Ultimate Warriors of Niger Delta have expressed grievances predominately focused on economic interests in Delta state. One of their key demands as reported in Punch on 8th June, was increased revenue allocation for oil-producing states. They have also advocated for the recommencement of the Export Processing Zone (EPZ) in Warri South West, which has been marred by political jockeying and inter-communal tensions between the Itsekiri and Ijaw communities. The building of the Maritime University in Okerenkoko, Delta state has also featured in the group's list of demands, with the stalled plans for the institution currently proposed on Ijaw Gbaramatu Kingdom land.

Niger Delta Red Squad (NDRS)

- *Based in Imo state*
- *Opposed to current revenue distribution from oil*

Emerging in Imo state with public threats in June 2016, the NDRS have made claims that they bombed oil facilities in Imo state. However, these claims have since been contradicted by the Nigerian Army on 5th July as reported in Vanguard and other media sources. Their grievances pertain to the distribution of oil revenues in Imo state, and the adverse impacts of oil projects on affected local communities.

Egbesu Mightier Fraternity (EMF)

- *Called for release of former National Security Adviser, Colonel Sambo Dasuki*
- *Called for release of Director of Radio Biafra, Nnamdui Kanu*
- *Called for government to stop "harassing" ex-militant Leader Tompolo*
- *Called for military to leave the Gbaramatu Kingdom*

The EMF emerged with threats alongside the growing chorus of militant groups in May 2016. Their key demands have been on the release and exoneration of key personalities, including IPOB leader Nnamdi Kanu, the former National Security Adviser (NSA) under the Jonathan administration Sambo Dasuki, and ex-militant leader Tompolo. In a statement to the Vanguard on 19th June, EMF claimed responsibility for oil pipeline bombings in parallel to separate attacks carried out by the NDA. The reference to Fraternity in the EMF title highlights the linkages of cultism with militancy, which also saw overlaps during the militancy in the 2000s.

Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND)

- *Targeted foreign oil interests from 2004-2014*
- *Former militant group outspoken against NDA*

The former militant 'umbrella' group, MEND is best known for its kidnappings of foreigners and attacks on oil pipelines in the early 2000s. For the most part as a cohesive group, it had remained quiet since it agreed to a ceasefire with the government in May 2014.

More recently however, on 22nd May 2016, a supposed MEND spokesperson released a statement in the Premium Times Nigeria which publicly condemned the actions of the NDA, and disavowed the new wave of militancy in the region with their cause. MEND also rejected the connection between their Niger Delta grievances and the pro-Biafra cause. The NDA responded with a statement on their website on June 6, 2016 with accusations that MEND had become "obsolete".

It is unclear whether elements previously associated with MEND and the conflict from the 2000s are involved with the new wave of militancy which has emerged in recent months. Ex-militant leaders such as Tompolo have publicly denounced any connection to the groups, despite the NDA listing him as part of their demands.

Conclusion

The current wave of militant groups which have continued to attack key oil infrastructure, and fuel insecurity in the region, are led by a range of ethnic and group-based grievances. These expressed grievances largely relate to perceived economic inequalities over oil wealth, and a sense of disillusionment with the federal government. It remains unclear whether many of the original groups or individuals that made up the first militancy wave in the 2000s, including groups aligned under the loose MEND banner, are part of the latest wave. However, at least some of the ex-militants appear to be distancing themselves from these new groups, as the future of the current Presidential Amenity Programme hangs in the balance.

The level of meaningful collaboration between the new militant groups including NDA, and the pro-Biafra cause, also remains unclear. The NDA have cast a wide net in terms of drawing in a range of grievances from across the region. If there are mutual incentives between the pro-Biafra and NDA camps to leverage a deal with the federal government, this may lead to more formal cooperation. However, with the Supreme

Council of Elders of IPOB making a public statement on 29th June disavowing the NDA, a formal alliance does not appear on the cards for now.

The future of the peace talks between the federal government and NDA also appear tenuous, given the renewed oil infrastructure attacks claimed by the NDA in the first week of July 2016. Adding to this is the uncertainty surrounding the future of the Nigerian Maritime University, Okerenkoko in Warri South — a major grievance stated by NDA and Ultimate Warriors of Niger Delta. Reports on 1st July from *TODAY Nigeria* and other media outlets have suggested that the government will not continue with building the Maritime University in the current location and seek to move it elsewhere. This may inflame tensions. These uncertainties, along with the reports of ethnic groups feeling excluded from the negotiations, suggest the federal government may need to try a new tack to bring the right balance of stakeholders back to the table. With the overall levels of violent incidents and fatalities at a seven-year high, combined with falling commodity prices and

production outputs, the situation within Niger Delta states has the potential to become even more volatile.

The more time the NDA is given to build alliances with a wider base of groups across the region, the more challenging it becomes to find peaceful solutions to such a range of discrete interests. Both national and international political stakeholders should urge the Buhari administration to find new common ground with peace negotiations, which may require rethinking which stakeholders they bring to the table — and their different leverage points.

Meanwhile, at the state and local levels, peace actors within the region must work to ensure that any legitimate grievances or interests not be hijacked by violent entrepreneurs seeking legitimacy. Violence only exacerbates the economic privation that these militant groups claim to be fighting against. Ex-militants, civil society, traditional rulers, and women's leaders, and government officials at every level should seek for peaceful solutions to resolve group-based grievances and promote economic and human development in the Niger Delta.