

A Historical Flashpoint: Rising Tensions in Delta State

Briefing: September 2016

The current tensions in Delta state between the Ijaw, Urhobo and Itsekiri communities can be traced back to the late 1990s and early 2000s, during the period marked by the Warri Crisis. During that time, disputes over land, natural resource revenues, and political representation led to widespread violence and the alleged deaths of hundreds. A tenuous peace has held since 2004, and although there were sporadic outbreaks of tension and violence between the ethnic groups for the next decade, particularly in 2013, it was deescalated before it reached a crisis point. As of early 2014, however, with the drop in global commodity prices and mounting pressures related to the economy, land ownership, elections, and the future of the Presidential Amnesty Programme, the risk is becoming more acute.

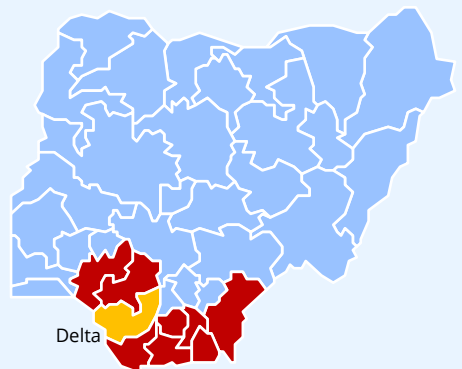
Another key driver of the Warri Crisis in the late 1990s and early 2000s was the proliferation of small arms and light weapons into the hands of opposing ethnic groups. This same dynamic also appears to be part of today's conflict environment in the Niger Delta. According to a report issued by the United Nations Regional Centre for Peace and Disarmament in Africa, and reported in *The Vanguard* on August 2nd, 2016, of the estimated 500 million illicit small arms and light weapons believed to be in Africa, up to 70% may be in Nigeria. The report goes on to say that the heavy proliferation of weapons to Nigeria, mainly believed to be flowing south from conflicts in Libya and Mali, have been fueled by

unresolved conflicts in the North and the Niger Delta regions.

Compounding and fueled by these conflict drivers, a new wave of militancy has taken hold in Delta state, with groups like the Niger Delta Avengers (NDA) attacking and blowing up pipelines and oil facilities in Warri North, Warri South, and Warri South West LGAs in May and June of this year. In August, a new militant group associated with the Urhobo ethnic group, calling themselves the Niger Delta Greenland Justice Mandate (NDGJM), began attacking oil delivery pipelines and other infrastructure in Delta state. Various attempts to mediate the issues between the government and the militant groups has seen limited success, with dialogue breaking down among communal groups as well as between these groups and the government.

At the same time, a Nigerian government military operation, known as "Operation Crocodile Smile," was formally launched in late August in Delta state, following a ceasefire between the NDA and the government. According to the Army High Command, "The core mandate of the operation is to provide adequate security for the residents and the strategic national economic assets of the nation in the embattled region." A few days later, the Army Chief of Staff went further to describe the military exercise as aimed at rooting out terrorists in the region who are sabotaging Nigeria's economic interests after the NDGJM vowed to fight the operation in a

Niger Delta States, Nigeria



The purpose of this briefing is to provide situational awareness to Peace Actors and other concerned parties about the rising tensions between communal groups in Delta State. While incidents of violence haven't worsened as of mid-2016, there is a significant risk that they will in the coming months. This briefing is therefore intended to provide a background on the conflict trends in the state and among communities over the past two years as well as the current state of play as of September 2016.

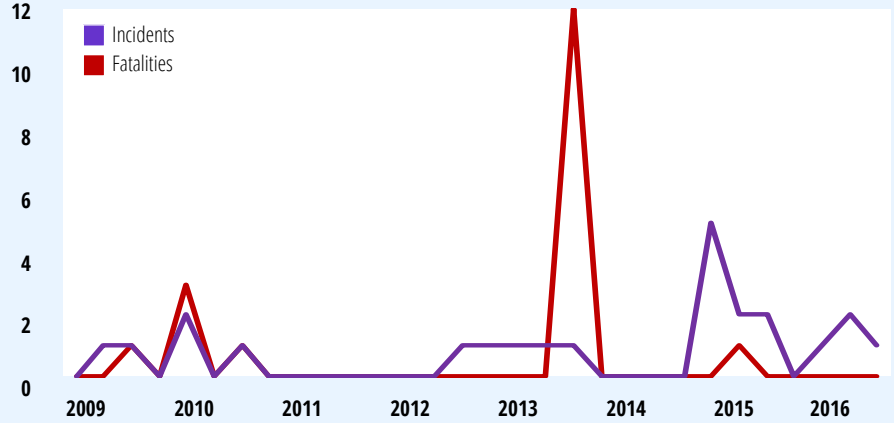


counter-campaign dubbed “Operation Crocodile Tears.” Additionally, in a September 7th, 2016 letter published online in the popular Nigerian blog, Nairaland, NDA spokesman Mudoch Agbinibo also dismissed the operation and vowed that the group would continue to resist in the form of amphibious warfare, with or without active peace talks.

Meanwhile, the continued downturn in the global oil market, combined with the rise of militant groups attacking pipelines and other infrastructure, has only added to the high levels of insecurity already present in the state. Youth, in particular, from the Ijaw, Itsekiri, and Urhobo communities, are becoming increasingly agitated about perceived injustices. These injustices are often framed in terms of inequitable access to land and resources, including employment opportunities, based on ethnic extraction. As has happened in similar periods of unrest and ethnic polarization in the Niger Delta, including during the Warri Crisis, youth are particularly vulnerable to being co-opted into militant and criminal groups if they feel disenfranchised and aggrieved.

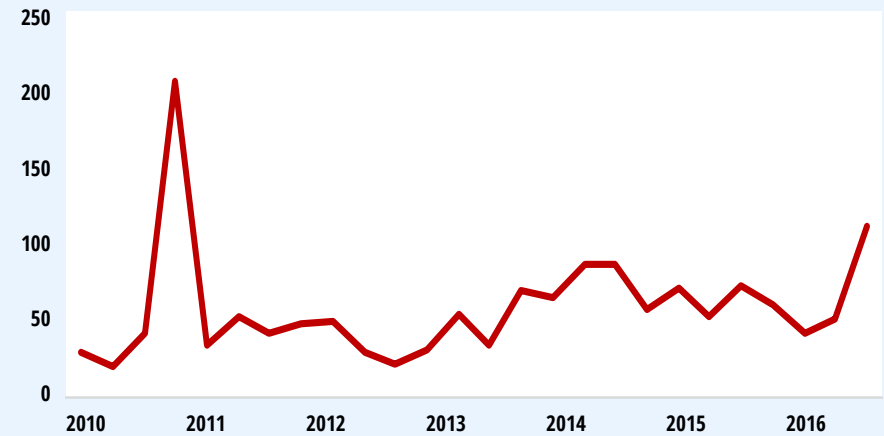
According to data from the P4P Peace Map, one of the main indicators of insecurity in Delta state over the past several years has been communal conflict based on Group Grievance. The spike in Group Grievance around elections is not unusual as politicians and political parties often manipulate ethnic sentiment for political gains, as was seen in April and May 2015 in Delta state. However, according to the PIND IPDU Niger Delta Quarterly Conflict Tracker for Q2 of 2016, the risk of communal violence and group-based attacks appeared to be rising again, and accounted for at least twelve deaths during this time period. Of the incidents reported to the IPDU SMS platform and the P4P Peace Map in the

Ethnic/Communal Tensions and Violence, Delta State January 2009 – June 2016



Sources: ACLED and Nigeria Watch formatted on the P4P Peace Map www.p4p-nigerlmo.org.

Reported Fatalities, Delta State January 2010 – June 2016



Sources: ACLED and Nigeria Watch formatted on the P4P Peace Map www.p4p-nigerlmo.org.

second quarter of 2016 (April-June), clashes between rival youth groups over land, access to resources, and lack of political inclusion accounted for at least seven deaths, as well as riots and shootings. This is a continuing trend from the first quarter of the year, when clashes between Urhobo

and Ijaw communities also led to violence and fatalities. In the second half of 2016, it appears that these inter-communal tensions are also affecting Ijaw-Itsekiri communities, which may be exacerbated by the rise in militancy and government military operations in the state.

The Role of the Amnesty Programme

Looming large over the current outbreak of insecurity in Delta state, as well as other key states in the Niger Delta, is the future of the Presidential Amnesty Programme. Started in 2009, the Amnesty Programme was intended to grant full pardons to all militants that turned in their weapons and ceased hostilities within a two-month period between August and October 2009. The Amnesty Programme also provided a monthly stipend of 65,000 Naira (\$327) and offered trainings and educational opportunities in Nigeria and abroad to encourage former combatants to seek gainful employment and reintegration into society. By most accounts, the Amnesty Programme has been a success, with most former militants ceasing armed agitation against the government and international business interests. However, as it was only set to run through 2015, and is closely associated with the administration of former President Goodluck Jonathan, last year's Federal elections brought questions and uncertainties over the future of the Programme and the fate of the many ex-militants currently on the payroll.

A complicating factor in the current environment, as noted in a June 15 interview with the current coordinator of the Amnesty Programme, Brig.-Gen. Paul Boroh in *The Vanguard*, is the sometimes unclear line between militancy and criminality in the current conflict environment in the Niger Delta. According to P4P Peace Map data, both militancy and criminality have elevated in Delta state, with armed robberies and other incidents of general crime occurring alongside attacks on infrastructure and national and international oil interests by militant groups agitating for renewed negotiations on

Concentration of Violence in Delta State

December 2015 - April 2016



Heat Map: Concentration of conflict incidents between December 2015 and April 2016.

Source: P4P Map; Nigeria Watch and ACLED data. Data source: Nigeria Watch

revenues from resource distribution. Also, in May of this year, the new federal budget signed by President Buhari cut funding to the Amnesty Programme by approximately 70%, according to an article and interview with Boroh in the *Financial Times* on May 9. According to Boroh, the budget cuts would remove approximately 13,000 former combatants who would not be paid in 2017, although the programme was extended to run through 2018. Following this announcement, in June and July, accusations began to surface that the government was late in paying former combatants as well as the stipends and school fees for students currently studying abroad under provisions of the Amnesty Programme. As of August, the government claimed that all back payments had been

settled and regular payments would resume, although whether the delay is directly correlated with a rise in criminality and attacks on national and international oil infrastructure is yet to be determined.

With the Amnesty Programme set to run through 2018, albeit at a reduced rate, it is unclear as to whether its provisions would extend to encompass the current militant groups now agitating in Delta state and the wider Niger Delta. In addition, the willingness of former militants currently receiving payments under the programme to stay out of the fray in the current conflict environment is becoming increasingly questionable.

Inter-and Intra-Communal Tensions and the Militancy

In this general environment of increasing insecurity and militancy, inter- and intra-communal cleavages are becoming more pronounced. For example, following a stakeholder's meeting between the Federal Government and a group of leaders from the Niger Delta in late August on a ceasefire and plan for the cessation of hostilities, conflicting statements emerged almost immediately disavowing both the process and the leadership. These statements, which were published in a series of articles in *The Vanguard* on September 1st and 2nd, came first from the Warri Study Group (WSG), an Itsekiri organization in Delta state. In a September 1st *Vanguard* article, the WSG stated that it had no confidence in Ijaw Chief, Edwin Clark, to represent the interests of the Itsekiri in any dialogue or peace talks with the Federal Government. The same article also noted that the Urhobo Youth Leaders Association (UYLA) had disassociated itself from the process, claiming that it was being driven by an Ijaw agenda that did not take into account the interests of other ethnic communities in Delta state. The UYLA went further to say that the continued attacks by the NDGJM on oil pipelines underscored its unwillingness to participate in a dialogue headed by individuals who were not representative of Urhobo interests.

At the intra-communal level, there simultaneously appears to be a fracturing among Itsekiri leaders. In a separate article published in *The Vanguard* on September 1st, 2016, Itsekiri lawmaker and member of the House of Representatives, Daniel Reyenieju, warned all parties against divisionary tactics meant to sow discord among and between groups. He went on to affirm that the representation of Itsekiri leaders at the dialogue was legitimate and adequate. Almost immediately, his statement was refuted in a September 2nd *Vanguard* article where the Olu of Warri, the traditional monarch, stated that the current Itsekiri representatives to the talks did not reflect the interests of the wider Itsekiri community in Delta state. In a statement by the Palace Administration, the Olu was quoted as saying: "The Palace states categorically that while individuals are entitled to freedom of speech and association, as guaranteed by the Nigeria Constitution, it has not authorized or mandated any person to represent either the Olu of Warri or Itsekiri people at these meetings. Consequently, those persons who attended these meetings cannot arrogate to themselves the authority to speak or represent either the Olu of Warri or the Itsekiri people."

Given these statements and the prevailing environment of distrust among parties, the military operation, "Crocodile Smile," is being met with skepticism if not outright hostility on the part of many stakeholders who feel that the deployment of military assets to the region will only exacerbate current tensions. According to a September 2nd, 2016 article in *The Guardian* titled "Fear of War Grips Niger Delta as Military Deploys Weapons," the Ijaw Youths Council (IYC) as well as the Ijaw monarch of Seimbiri Kingdom, Pere Charles E. Ayemi-Botu, warned that the operation was likely to cause further chaos in the region, as well as undermine peace talks among all parties.

When considering the existing conflict dynamics occurring between communities in Delta state over land ownership and access, resource distribution, and political representation at both the community level and within the context of a dialogue meant to resolve the ongoing militancy, the need for vigilance is clear. As was seen in the Warri Crisis that spanned nearly seven years and was characterized by outbreaks of violence and deep polarization between and among communal groups, as well as between the federal government and local stakeholders, the current prevailing conditions in Delta state are amenable to conflict resolution efforts.

Conclusion

Overall, both quantitative and qualitative information points to the fact that ethnicity and group-based tensions have been a key driver of violent conflict in Delta State in the past decade and half, ignited on and off over a period of time but never truly being resolved. When mixed with the current armed militancy and attacks against oil infrastructure in the region, the result is a situation that could potentially undermine the relative stability of the entire region.

With the militancy now appearing to take on a deepening ethnic dimension, the situation is one that calls for deep concern amongst peace actors and the international community alike and requires taking a proactive role to reduce the ethnic rhetoric as a means of preventing further escalation of tensions in the state. If anything, the Warri Crisis of the late 1990s and early 2000s should stand out as a stark reminder of how very fast, and very destructively,

unchecked and unresolved conflict drivers in Delta State can ignite. However, the resolution of the Warri Crisis may also provide something of a blueprint, in the role that civil society, traditional rulers, and government played to navigate the turbulence and deescalate tensions. We only hope that this time they act before matters get out of hand.