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USIPeace Briefing

Bringing Peace to the Niger Delta

By **Kelly Campbell**

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The conflict in the Niger Delta has posed a fundamental domestic challenge to Nigerian security for more than a decade. Despite pledges to address continued instability in the Delta, the administration of Nigerian President Umaru Yar'Adua has not yet initiated a process to resolve the political, economic and security problems in the region. Oil production continues to diminish as a result of militant attacks, and is currently 20 to 25 percent below capacity. Meanwhile, militia members in the Niger Delta continue to engage in criminal activities such as kidnapping and oil bunkering¹ to maximize profits for themselves and their political patrons.

Oil bunkering and general instability in the region compound energy problems abroad, reducing supply and driving up the cost of oil in global markets. Nigeria is currently the fourth-largest supplier of oil to the United States; in March 2008 alone, the U.S. imported 1.154 million barrels per day from Nigeria.²

On May 2, 2008, USIP convened a [public meeting](#) to discuss the current situation in the Niger Delta and what actions the Nigerian government and the international community can take to restore peace to the region. The featured speakers were: Professor Peter Lewis of the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS); Dr. Judy Asuni, executive director of Academic Associates PeaceWorks in Warri, Delta State, Nigeria and a current visiting scholar at SAIS; and Professor Darren Kew of the University of Massachusetts, Boston. The Institute's [David Smock](#) and Steve Morrison of the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) moderated the meeting. This USIPeace Briefing summarizes the discussion.

Instability in the Niger Delta: Background and Major Issues

The conflict in the Niger Delta has its roots in the increasing protests of the region's communities against their political, economic and environmental disenfranchisement. The Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP), launched in 1990, was the first group to gain international attention for their grievances against the Nigerian government and regional oil companies. MOSOP's goals included increased local control over resources and more equitable development. MOSOP also sought the resolution of fishing and farming issues that arose from the environmental effects of oil extraction, such as oil spills, acid rain and soil degradation. Protection of human rights became another demand after peaceful protests by the Ogoni people were met with arrests, repression, and violence from the military regime of General Sani Abacha. The Ogoni movement inspired a host of similar organizing efforts in the region, particularly among the Ijaw.



Map of Niger Delta. (Courtesy [University of Texas Libraries](#))

The center of protests and political activism then shifted to western states in the Niger Delta, particularly Bayelsa and Delta States, where the Itsekiri, Urhobo, Ijaje and Ijaw communities began mobilizing over boundary and resource issues. The Ijaw in particular demanded accountability from regional political officials and a greater voice in the region's affairs. Their demands were outlined in the Kaiama Declaration, released in December 1998, which called for the immediate withdrawal of the military from Ijaw areas and the cessation of oil production if equitable control over these resources was not

returned to the oil-producing communities. Clashes between Ijaw groups and the Nigerian government led to the imposition of emergency rule in late 1998 and early 1999. Tensions culminated in the Odi massacre in November 1999, in which the Nigerian military killed dozens of citizens.

After a brief lull in violence, the conflict in the Niger Delta escalated in 2002 and 2003, particularly during and after the election process in 2003. Three overarching and interconnected problems contribute to continued regional instability: lack of good governance; lack of social and economic development; and increased militarization.

Lack of Good Governance:

The Nigerian state lacks political legitimacy at all levels of government because of chronically flawed elections, the most blatant of which were the rigged elections of 2007. The lack of legitimacy is more pronounced in the Niger Delta, which suffers from what one speaker called a "striking lack of democracy." The region has never had credible elections since the military returned to the barracks in 1999. In both the 2003 and 2007 elections, voter turnout in the Niger Delta was extremely low, on average less than five percent. Gang members on the payroll of politicians and party officials intimidated the few voters who showed up at polling stations, and in many areas no elections were held at all—yet the official election results reported more than 90 percent turnout in some states. In Bayelsa State, despite single digit voter participation in the 2003 election witnessed by both domestic and international observers, the official final tally amounted to 123 percent participation. During the 2007 elections, Nigerian officials reported results for polling stations that were never even opened in Rivers State.³

The federal government has also failed to provide goods and services to the people of the Niger Delta, who experience terrible poverty despite living in the region that produces the vast majority of Nigeria's wealth. Widespread corruption and lack of transparency in detailing how oil money is allocated and spent at the state level further erode the people's trust in the government. Equally important, neither the government nor the oil companies have adequately addressed environmental problems such as gas flaring and oil spills. Finally, the Nigerian government has not provided adequate security to communities in the Niger Delta. With few exceptions, the government has allowed gangs and militias, some of which are funded by local politicians and party officials, to run rampant. Violence between rival gangs—particularly in the aftermath of the 2003 and 2007 elections—has resulted in the deaths of dozens of innocent civilians.⁴ Even when security forces have been deployed to the Niger Delta, they have also committed atrocities against civilians, and some officers have been engaged in corruption and the illegal oil trade.⁵

Lack of Social and Economic Development:

Little substantive progress has been made in addressing development issues or revenue allocation in the Niger Delta. The region continues to lack adequate social services, viable employment opportunities, or economic growth and development. Although in 2006 two-thirds of the militia members and leaders surveyed by Academic Associates PeaceWorks said they would take advantage of training or jobs if they were available, the dearth of such opportunities contributes to the decision of youths to join militias for economic gain. Profiteering from oil bunkering and the kidnapping of oil workers presents a lucrative and increasingly popular alternative, especially since the youth lack any sense of ownership of, participation in or benefit from the oil industry. This virtual exclusion of local individuals or companies from employment opportunities in the oil and gas sectors has led to anger, alienation, and aggression. It has also contributed to the steady supply of youth who are willing to join gangs and militias.

Militarization of the Niger Delta

Militia groups in the region have proliferated, often sustained by government and party officials who use the militias for their own political and economic purposes. Groups such as the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), which was organized in 2006, function as a loose network of gangs rather than a coherent organization. They lack a common political agenda or political wings that could participate in a negotiation process. While some groups possess legitimate grievances and goals, they also engage in criminal activities that lead to the continuation of the conflict—by doing the bidding of the politicians and others who pay them, the militia members perpetuate the governance system that contributes to the region's problems.

The militias have become increasingly violent, both toward one another and toward civilians. Kidnapping victims now include not just oil workers, but also children and other people who are not associated with the oil industry. An influx of small arms and more sophisticated weapons into the Niger Delta from regional and international markets has led to the increased arming of the militias. They are now nearly evenly matched with the Nigerian military, which was dispatched to the region in 2003 and maintains a significant presence there. The result has been a stalemate. Politicians in the Niger Delta who fund the militias retain the lion's share of illegally sourced wealth and are able to sustain their activities with minimal

losses, raising enough revenue to pay off their patronage networks and militias. Politicians in Abuja offer plans for peace without taking action, doing little to alter the status quo.

The Way Forward: The Role of Nigeria and the International Community

Thus far, the Nigerian government has displayed paralysis and indifference when it comes to resolving the conflict in the Niger Delta. Indeed, Abuja has shown little interest in launching a serious political dialogue process that will address the fundamental issues. However, one speaker argued that a window of opportunity for launching a political dialogue has opened. President Yar'Adua's compromised victory in the 2007 elections diminished his political legitimacy, and over the past year he has worked to earn support and build political alliances. If the Nigerian Supreme Court upholds his victory in the 2007 election, Yar'Adua may feel emboldened to implement his vision for Nigeria, including a peace plan for the Niger Delta. His administration is planning a conference during the summer of 2008 to launch what may be an ambitious peace process, but already many of the key regional stakeholders have not been invited, prompting some militias to threaten anyone from their areas who tries to attend.

Any credible peace process must involve all parties to the conflict, including representatives of the government, the communities of the Niger Delta, the militants and the leading oil companies in the region. A framework for discussion, a forum for articulating grievances, and a well-developed agenda are all needed to begin a negotiation process that will lead to a comprehensive solution of the relevant political, economic and security problems. In order to organize and oversee this process, a comprehensive, unified facilitator with regular access to President Yar'Adua will be essential. A federal government task force of the key ministers and oil parastatals that can make decisions and respond quickly to the needs of the peace process would also be of great benefit.

The process must first deal with the governors, party officials, and powerful national actors who have established small fiefdoms in the Niger Delta. These potential spoilers have the most to lose in a more legitimate and accountable political system. An elite-targeted negotiation should be conducted in parallel with a public consultation process that engages communities directly, given the lack of accountability of local politicians. Second, jump-starting development projects could provide opportunities for local organizations to play leadership roles, giving the Niger Delta communities a stake in the peace process and convincing them that the government is serious. Discussions about localized resource control and a new formula for allocating resources must also be on the agenda: a principal demand of opposition groups is that the 13 percent of oil and gas revenue that state governments currently receive from the federal government be increased—some argue to as high as 50 percent. Political leaders from other regions sharply disagree, promising a difficult negotiation that will also have to engage the National Assembly in order to amend the revenue formula. National action will also be required for election reform, which is a desperate need for all Nigerians, but is particularly acute in the Niger Delta. Finally, the government will need to play a demonstrable security role. While unleashing the military in the Niger Delta would be counterproductive, the government must provide security for citizens by reining in the militias, perhaps through provisional ceasefire arrangements until a more permanent agreement is reached.

Although the onus to resolve the conflict in the Niger Delta must be on the Nigerian government, the Yar'Adua administration's inaction to date indicates that external pressure must be continued for any kind of problem solving process to begin. The international community, particularly the U.S. and the U.K., could do a great deal to support a Nigerian-led political dialogue once the Yar'Adua government demonstrates serious initiative. The U.S. and the U.K. are already cooperating closely and quietly encouraging the Nigerians to move swiftly, but they will also have to work to coordinate productive responses from Western oil companies if a comprehensive peace process gets underway. The United Nations could also play a supporting role with mediation assistance, development aid, and environmental cleanup. One speaker suggested the establishment of a contact group that would include the U.N., U.S., U.K., and perhaps China as well as non-governmental organizations within the U.S. This group could support a Nigerian-led mediation process with funding and advice, and could lead an effort to control the importation of weapons into the region.

The conflict in the Niger Delta continues to challenge both the Nigerian government and the international community. On the domestic front, one speaker noted that the strategy for moving forward involves an inherent contradiction regarding the nature of federalism in Nigeria. While more localized resource control and democratic policies are needed in the Niger Delta, the federal government's ability to play a more constructive role in establishing security and making governors more accountable is equally important. To date, the international community has deferred to the Nigerian government's insistence that it will handle the matter internally. However, the international community also has a stake in helping to resolve this conflict: the problems in the Niger Delta also destabilize global markets, especially as the price of oil continues to rise. Bringing peace and stability to the region will require the Yar'Adua administration to fulfill its own promises of launching credible peace and development processes, supported by the cooperation of the international community.

Notes

1. Oil bunkering refers to the illegal theft of oil. Militants divert barrels of oil that, according to law, belong to the Nigerian federal government and sell them, reducing the supply of oil for global markets and costing Nigeria millions of dollars in revenue each year.

2. Energy Information Administration, U.S. Department of Energy, http://www.eia.doe.gov/pub/oil_gas/petroleum/data_publications/company_level_imports/current/import.html

3. "Politics as War: The Human Rights Impact and Causes of Post-Election Violence in Rivers State, Nigeria," Human Rights Watch, v. 20, no. 3 (A), March 2008, <http://hrw.org/reports/2008/nigeria0308/>

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.

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This USIPeace Briefing was written by **Kelly Campbell**, senior program assistant in the [Center for Analysis and Prevention](#) at the United States Institute of Peace. The views expressed here are not necessarily those of USIP, which does not advocate specific policies.

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United States Institute of Peace - 1200 17th Street NW - Washington, DC 20036
+1.202.457.1700 (phone) - +1.202.429.6063 (fax)
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