

## Explaining the Violent Conflicts in Nigeria's Niger Delta: Is the Rentier State Theory and the Resource-curse Thesis Relevant?

### EXPLICATIONS DES CONFLITS VIOLENTS DANS LE DELTA DU NIGER AU NIGERIA: LA THEORIE DE L'ÉTAT RENTIER ET LA THESE MALEDICTION DES RESSOURCES PERTINENTES

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#### Abstract

Since the early 1970s when crude oil became Nigeria's main source of foreign exchange, it soon joined the league table of rentier states. However, beginning from the second half of the 1990s to date, the Niger Delta, the heartbeat and the engine that drives Nigeria's economy has being stormed by large scale tsunamis of unimaginable proportion due to militant activities. Consequently, Nigeria's quest for unity, stability, national security and accelerated economic development are being undermined. This article explores the relevance of the rentier state theory and the resource-Curse thesis to explaining essence of the renewed violence in the Niger Delta. The article concludes that, although the basic assumptions of the rentier state theory and resource-curse thesis are relevant, there are other salient factors that are also paramount.

**Key words:** Rentier state; Resource curse; Oil resource; Violent conflict; Niger delta

#### Résumé

Depuis le début des années 1970 lorsque le pétrole brut est devenu la principale source du Nigeria de change constants, il est bientôt rejoint le tableau de la ligue des Etats rentiers. Cependant, à partir de la seconde moitié des années 1990 à ce jour, le delta du Niger, le battement de coeur et le moteur de l'économie du Nigeria a été pris d'assaut par les tsunamis à grande échelle de proportion

inimaginable en raison des activités militantes. Par conséquent, la quête du Nigeria pour l'unité, la stabilité, la sécurité nationale et d'accélérer le développement économique sont compromis. Cet article explore la pertinence de la théorie de l'état de rentiers et de la thèse malédiction des ressources pour expliquer l'essence de la violence renouvelée dans le delta du Niger. L'article conclut que, bien que les hypothèses de base de la théorie de l'état de rentiers et de la malédiction des ressources thèse sont pertinentes, il ya d'autres facteurs importants qui sont également primordiaux.

**Mots clés:** Etat rentier; Malédiction des ressources; Les ressources pétrolières; Les conflits violents; Le delta du Niger

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#### INTRODUCTION

Oil in commercial quantity was discovered in Nigeria in 1956, and has since the 1970s become the mainstay of the national economy. In the past five decades, absolute oil production as well as the dependence of the country on the oil exports has therefore increased significantly. For instance, as at 2006, Nigeria's petroleum exports as percentage of total national exports was 98 percent (UNDP, 2008). Significantly therefore, Nigeria's dependence on oil, "measured by oil exports as a percentage of total national exports or by oil rents as a percentage of overall government revenue, is even higher than, for example, that of petrostate Venezuela" (Mähler, 2010, 14). The implication of Nigeria's dependence on oil as its main source of revenue has been the vulnerability of its

economy to the volatility of the global oil price. Similarly, according to Mogues (2008,9), since oil became the mainstay of the Nigerian economy, “agricultural products which used to be the backbone of the Nigerian economy, and which constituted approximately 80 percent of total national exports in 1960, had by 1976 declined to only 4 percent”.

Given the above, from a position of relative obscurity, oil became the central factor in Nigeria’s political economy. To be more specific, since 2008, Nigeria became one of the largest oil producers in the world, and considering its low internal consumption, the eight largest oil exporters in the world (Bfai, 2008). However, even though Nigeria is richly endowed with both renewable and non-renewable oil resources that are predominantly found in the Niger Delta areas, paradoxically, the Niger Delta remain the poorest region, due largely to the ecologically unfriendly exploitation of oil and the politics of oil. For instance, as Mukwaya (2005: 127-134) observed, “the ecological devastation caused by oil production has rendered the main occupation of the people, which previously was farming and fishing useless”. Thus, “the people of the Niger Delta are deprived of their fair share of the wealth on which the entire Nigerian federation depends; they benefit only from compensation for incidents of oil pollution”.

In view of the effects of environmental degradation, and unfavourable oil politics, since the second half of the 1990s to date, Nigeria has been witnessing uprisings, and recently graduating to armed violence targeted at the Federal Government and oil-producing companies (Omotola, 2010). Unlike the Ken Saro Wiwa-led uprising that was limited to the Ogoniland, the recent armed violence in the Niger Delta involves several communities, and has also been more of armed struggle than peaceful protests. The Nigerian Government on realising that the escalation of the violence portends danger to the unity, national security and development of Nigeria, has since 2008 embarked on the Niger Delta Amnesty initiative (Asuni, 2009). At this stage, while it may be too early to judge the effectiveness of the Amnesty initiative, suffice to say that, Nigeria is still witnessing militarised unrests and agitations for autonomy from the very region that produces 90 percent of its foreign exchange earnings. Thus, given the ferocious nature of the uprisings, some people have commented that the militant activities in the Niger Delta is one of the greatest challenges Nigeria will be facing in the twenty-first century.

Employing the rentier state theory and the resource-Curse thesis as framework of analysis, this article explored the essence of the renewed violence in the Niger Delta and hopes to conclude that, even though the rentier state theory and resource-curse thesis are relevant to explaining what is described as the immediate or initial motives of violence, other remote and prevailing factors in the Nigerian environment are also significant. Building on

the above observation therefore, it is advanced here that, the negative impacts of the immediate and remote factors among others are what combined to escalate the violence in Nigeria’s Niger Delta.

## 1. AN OVERVIEW OF THE RENTIER STATE THEORY AND THE RESOURCE CURSE THESIS

There has been a growing interest in the study of natural resources and their diverse international and domestic impacts on countries in the recent years. Although partly divergent in their main assumptions, in the opinion of Mähler (2010: 7), “the rentier state theory and the resource curse thesis are the two central theoretical approaches that focus on the topic of resource abundance...” Embedded in the assumption of both the rentier state theory and the resource-curse is that, “developments in resource exporting countries are negatively affected by socio-political and economic distortions”. The main assumptions of these two theoretical approaches are explained in turn as follows.

The concept of the rentier state was first mentioned in the study of patterns and problems of economic development in pre-revolutionary Iran by Hossein Mahdavi in 1970. It was expanded to cover more States in the Arab world, and popularised by Hazem Beblawi and Giovanni Luciani in 1987. It was thus, these scholars that specifically gave the rentier state its popularity and clarity. In the study of these scholars, a rentier state was considered to be that which at least 40 percent of the total government revenue consists of economic rents (Beblawi and Luciani, 1977). The rent mentioned above is defined by Dunning (2008,39) as “the excess over the return to capital, land, and labour when these factors of production are put to their next best use”. According to the rentier state theory, “the two central effects of dependence on economic rents are economic inefficiency and, as a consequence, the obstruction of socioeconomic development” (Beck, 2007: 46). With regard to the political effects, the rentier state theory proposes that (oil) rents have a stabilizing effect on authoritarian rule (Mahdavi, 1971; Beblawi & Luciani, 1987 and Ross, 2001).

Although, the rentier state theory was initially based on empirical findings in the Middle East, Beck (2007:44) notes, “its proponents claimed, it is universally valid”. Essentially, the rentier state theory attributes connection of oil rents and authoritarianism to the following factors: Firstly, it is presumed that oil rents foster the formation of stabilizing patronage networks, widespread clientelism, and assistentialistic distribution policies, all of which lessen the pressure from the population to democratize and may additionally result in the de-politicisation of the society. Secondly, the abundance of revenues generated by the oil sector means that national rulers do not need

to tax the population. This again may disburden the political elite of demands from the population for political participation and accountability on the part of the elites (Mähler, 2010).

From the foregoing, it is observable that, the rentier state theory does not focus primarily on violence, but rather on the stability of authoritarian rule. However, recent studies illustrate that, resource wealth makes it easier for authoritarian rulers to use violence in the form of political repression, for example, because it enables the financing of a massive security apparatus (Ross, 2001 and Karl, 2007). On the basis of the above argument, one can deduce that, given the percentage of what Nigeria spend from its annual budget to secure the support of indigenous chiefs and elites, as well as to maintain law and order in the Niger Delta, especially as a result of recently renewed armed militancy, it becomes evident that, there is to some extent, a connection between oil abundance and authoritarianism, and hence, the relevance of the rentier theory to explaining the essence of the violent conflicts in Nigeria's Niger Delta.

The resource-curse thesis on the other hand, is another theoretical approach that has gained importance within the natural resource-conflict theoretical debate. There are two schools of thought within the resource-curse debate. The first school of thought consists of those scholars who place special emphasis on the economic characteristics of resource-rich countries. That is, building upon the basic assumptions of rentier state theory, they claim that resource wealth is connected to poor economic growth and other economic problems such as Dutch disease effects and poor performance of the agricultural and manufacturing sectors accompanied by an insufficient degree of diversification and extreme vulnerability towards external shocks. The scholars that belong to the first line of the resource-curse debate include Auty (1993) and Sachs & Warner (2001) among others.

The second school of thought on the other hand, consists of those scholars that focus on the connection between natural resources and violent conflicts. The central assumption of this school of thought, which to some extent contradicts the assumptions of the rentier state theory is that, resource dependent countries such as Nigeria, are more likely to experience internal instability and violent conflict than non-resource countries. The scholars that belong to the second line of the resource-curse debate include Collier & Hoeffler (2001); Le Billon (2001) and De Soysa (2000) among others.

In their various studies to establish connection between resource abundance and violence, the scholars of the second line of the resource-curse debate advanced two main arguments. First, parts of the population of a country such as the Niger Delta might feel that they are deprived of the financial benefits of the revenues derived

from oil resource, and possibly also suffering from the ecological and social impacts of production. Similarly, resource wealth is considered the target of avaricious rebels who wish to take possession of the oil resource revenues (Collier & Hoeffler, 2001). Secondly, revenues derived from a resource can serve as a catalyst for violent conflict as the rebel groups and other actors involved are able to use it to finance their rebellion (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004). And similarly, abundant resources, especially oil, it is argued can indirectly increase the likelihood of violent conflict because, it weakens political institutions and/or trigger socio-economic decline. It is in the above vein for example, that Fearon & Latin (2003,81) observed that, "oil producers tend to have weaker state apparatuses than one would expect given their level of income, because the rulers have less need of a socially intrusive and elaborate bureaucratic system to raise revenues".

The above are the main assumptions in the rentier state theory and resource-curse thesis. On face value, the utility of the two approaches appear valid. But recent literatures have not only questioned, but criticised the alleged connection between resource and violence. For example, recent studies identified countries such as Botswana, Chile and Norway among others with abundant resources, and yet are stable and economically prosperous democracies (Hegre & Sambanis, 2006; Brunnschweiler & Bulte, 2006 and Di John, 2007). To this end, some scholars have demanded a further theoretical differentiation of the debate and have suggested that the impact of certain conditions is imperative for the prevalence or absence of the so called resource-curse (Snyder & Bhavnani, 2005; Boschini, Peterson & Jesper, 2004; Basedau, 2005 and Basedau & Lay, 2009). Furthermore, some scholars have even gone further to indicate the potential of external, social and historical forces in explaining the connections between resource and violence (Di John, 2007 and Rosser, 2006).

In spite of the criticisms of the rentier theory and resource-curse thesis, given the escalation of violence in Nigeria's Niger Delta, and need to get to the bottom of the conflicts that are threatening and or undermining the unity, national security and development of Nigeria, their utilities for area and comparative studies remains undoubtedly substantial. In this connection therefore, taking into consideration the embedded assumptions of the rentier state theory and the resource-curse thesis that are reviewed above, and which overly interpreted, appear to suggest potential connection between the oil resources and escalation of violence in the Niger Delta; analysis of the causal factors that explains the essence of the renewed violence in the Niger Delta becomes necessary. It is expected that after a critical analysis of the interplay of the causal factors, the selected approaches should throw some light on the essence of the violence in Nigeria's Niger Delta.



## 2. EXPLAINING THE IMMEDIATE ESSENCE OF VIOLENCE IN NIGERIA'S NIGER DELTA

Since oil was first discovered in Oloibiri, and subsequent production since the 1970s, it has been causing severe environmental damage in the Niger Delta. For instance, UNDP (2006,76) report noted that, "oil spills has led to the contamination of water resources, the destruction of farmland, and the dispersion of toxic materials". Similarly, according to Lubeck, Watts & Lipschutz (2007:9), "Nigeria is considered as one of the biggest gas flarers in the world". Expectedly, this gas flaring "harms wildlife, farmland, and human beings through air pollution, acid rain, noise, and increase in temperature" (UNDP, 2006:78-79). These environmental damages and associated grievances represent a permanent source of discontent and mistrust on the part of the Niger Delta's population towards the government. It is for this reason that, Mähler (2010:16) noted that, "the discontent is most likely continuing to grow due to unfulfilled, yet longstanding promises of compensation".

The politics that surround revenue allocation is an important factor in the escalation of violence in the Delta. For instance, in a report by the UNDP (2006:16), the percentage of oil revenue allocation to the oil producing states "has declined from 50 percent in 1970 to 20 percent between 1975 and 1979, and down to only 3 percent between 1992 and 1999". Under the civilian administration in the period 1999 and 2011, the percentage of oil revenue allocation to the oil producing states has been pegged at 13 percent. Given the unfavourable revenue allocation, the Delta states are angered that they are deprived by the central government that is dominated by a segment of the Nigerian ethnic group from benefiting a substantial income that are generated in their immediate environment.

To make matter worse, the physical and social infrastructures in the Niger Delta are highly underdeveloped. For instance, according to IDEA (2001,254), the Niger Delta is characterised by "insufficient access to health care, potable drinking water, and electric power". In addition, "the housing situation was once considered in comparative terms, generally worse than that in the rest part of the country".

An important structural problem of note that results from economic distortions in oil economies is widespread unemployment. The oil industry is generally very capital intensive but not labour intensive. In Nigeria, this structural problem is particularly pronounced, as crude oil is hardly processed within the country but rather immediately exported. For example, "Nigeria currently imports almost 85 percent of the refined oil products it uses" (EAI, 2009: 4). While the capacity of the four existing state-owned refineries is completely

insufficient, so far "no private refinery exists in Nigeria" (Asuni, 2009,8). As at 2005, in a report by AI (2005,35), the entire oil industry in Nigeria "employed directly or indirectly only about 35,000 people". Conversely, whereas the oil industry has already destroyed jobs in the agricultural sector as noted above, there have been no efficient counter-measures from the government. As a result, unemployment, particularly youth unemployment is extremely high in the Niger Delta, markedly higher than in the rest parts of the country (IDEA, 2001,254; UNDP, 2006,131 and Aigbokhan, 2007,195).

By geographical characteristics, the Niger Delta is largely covered with marshes, forests and creeks. To Ukeje (2008,10), it is especially "for nonlocals a difficult to access territory and hence an excellent area for militants to train and retreat to once they have kidnapped a foreign oil worker or caused colossal damages to oil production infrastructures". While probably not of superior importance in this argument, it nevertheless can be considered as one of the reasons for the prolongation of the conflicts between militant groups and the Nigerian government. Furthermore, the geographical characteristics of the Niger Delta make the area extremely vulnerable to oil spills and other collateral damage resulting from oil exploitation. For example, spilled oil is easily caught up in the stagnant water of the marshland and contaminates the drinking water. The Niger Delta people blame the mess on the environment on the carelessness of the oil producing companies and the attitude of the Nigerian government towards environmental protection.

For a long time, The Nigerian oil sector has been dominated by Multinational Oil Companies (MNOCs) such as Shell Petroleum Development Company, Exxon Mobil, Chevron, Total (Elf) and Eni/Agip among others. Despite the privatisation and commercialisation of the oil industry occasioned by the Structural Adjustment Programme, Ukiwo (2008: 76) notes that, "private Nigerian oil companies only produce a small amount of oil". Thus, in keeping with their operational characteristics, which among other are to make profit no matter the cost to the host environment, the multinational oil companies have influenced the essence of the violent conflicts in several ways. For example, the oil companies carry part of the blame for the environmental pollution caused by oil production. Nevertheless, the Nigerian government is to bear the entire blame for not ensuring compliance to standards that will ensure the protection of nature and human beings. Furthermore, The MNOCs have indirectly contributed to the increased militarisation of the conflicts and the garrisoning of the Niger Delta, by requesting the Nigerian government to provide security services, even when civil protests were still mainly peaceful (Omotola, 2006:16; Engel, 2005: 196). In addition, the oil companies also make use of private security services, whose notion about the Niger Delta

communities is that of saboteurs, terrorist and criminals, hence the orientation and approaches of the security services is brutality. Similarly, some oil companies have also "provided financial assistance to either potential militants or existing groups in order to pacify them" (ICG, 2006,24-25). While this in the short term might reduce violence, on the long run, in the opinion of Hazen & Horner (2007,38), "it is obvious that the MNOCs risks further, the empowerment of potential or existing militant groups".

Another factor that clearly contributes to the increase and especially the continuation of violent conflict in the Niger Delta in recent years is "the illegal oil trade, which has increased drastically since 2000" (HRW, 2003,9). The illegally bunkered oil is shipped to refineries in Ivory Coast, Senegal and Benin or directly sold to the broader international market, mostly to Eastern Europe. The actors that are involved in this oil bunkering include the militant groups, who are paid ransom either in cash or in kind. Other actors that are also involved include the security forces, especially the Nigerian navy; local and regional politicians; and other powerful actors such as godfathers and international business people (AI, 2005,35; ICG, 2006,9 and Bello, 2011,256-260). Because of the broad involvement of influential persons that are involved in the oil bunkering, the approach of the Nigerian government to solving the Niger Delta crisis has been marked by significant inconsistency, persistent reluctance and a lack of engagement.

Nigeria currently exports approximately 50 percent of its crude oil to the United States (EIU, 2009). On the other hand, "approximately 10 percent of the oil imports of the United States come from Nigeria" (Lubeck & Watts, 2007,4). Thus, since 1999 when Nigeria became a democracy, "the relationship between the two countries has been harmonious, and has been marked by a benevolent attitude towards Nigeria on the part of the United States" (Bergstresser & Tull, 2008,19). Because of the expanded oil trade between the two countries, the "United States has increased supply of its weapons to Nigeria, and has at the same time expanded its military presence in the Gulf of Guinea", for example, via naval patrols (Hazen & Horner, 2007,101). In addition, in 2005, the Nigeria and the United States announced a coordinated actions to "counter small arms trafficking, bolster maritime and coastal security, promote community development and combat poverty, and to fight money laundering and other financial crimes" (Lubeck, Watts & Lipschutz, 2007,19). Primarily because of its own economic interests (oil supply), and also because of strategic considerations with respect to the role of Nigeria as a regional power in West Africa, the United States is generally interested in reducing the internal instability in the country. Nevertheless, "the United States' efforts to exert its influence on the violent conflict in the Niger Delta have at least to date, been of low success rate" (Lubeck &

Watts, 2007,20). The implication of the US and Nigeria security operation is that, the Niger Delta communities see the joint security actions as a garrisoning agenda that denies them the fundamental right of movement in their own land.

What is clear from the foregoing analysis is that, the distortions caused by the development of oil economy are the central factors in the dissatisfaction of the Niger Delta population and the consequent armed struggle. In this connection, it also becomes clear to assume that the violence in the Niger Delta is connected to the oil resource and its production. By implication therefore, the rentier state theory and the resource-curse thesis to some extent are valid in explaining the essence of the violent conflicts in the Niger Delta.

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### **3. EXPLAINING THE REMOTE ESSENCE OF VIOLENCE IN NIGERIA'S NIGER DELTA**

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The remote essences that are most notably triggering violence in the Niger Delta are two key cleavages between ethnic and religious identity groups. The first is a cleavage at the national level between north and south. For instance, to Brunner (2002,132), "the existing ethnic and religious differences between the north, dominated by the predominantly Muslim Hausa-Fulani people and the mainly Christian, ethnically heterogeneous south that were exacerbated and politicised by the different forms of colonial rule". What one can infer from the above is that, even before oil became the mainstay of the Nigerian economy, these differences had created a sharp internal division in the country. This difference is further heightened by the perception of political domination of the northern elites and their overwhelming influence on the central government over the southern population. Therefore, other than the oil factor, the mistrust and the lack of nationhood had endangered the internal stability of Nigeria.

The second cleavage, which is provoking violence in the Niger Delta even more directly are localized within the Niger Delta. Such cleavage for instance, is the ferocious and recurring interethnic and intercommunity conflicts. A central dimension of the interethnic and intercommunity conflicts has been minority ethnic groups' concern about the dominance of the major groups. An example would be "the Ogoni people's fear of Igbo dominance; an anxiety which goes back to colonial times" (Brunner, 2002, 252). The other central dimension of the conflicts is the struggle between the major ethnic group, the Ijaw, and other ethnic groups, especially the Itsekiri, Urhobo and Andoni, mostly "regarding the ownership of land and local power" (Ngomba-Roth, 2007, 145). While the ethnic cleavages in the Niger Delta are contributing considerably to violent conflict at the local level, it can on the other hand be

assumed that “these cleavages are one of the reasons for the absence of broader and harmonious actions against the Nigerian government and the oil companies” (Zinn, 2005:107).

While the population density in Nigeria is generally quite high, the population density in the habitable parts of the Niger Delta is “even above the national average and it is persistently increasing” (UNDP 2006: 24). This high population density is causing land scarcity and can therefore be considered another factor fueling the internal tensions in a region that is ethnically very fragmented.

Loss of influence of family clans and traditional societal structures are further aspects that are contributing to the increase in Niger Delta violence. In the recent time, the social and political authority of local traditional rulers has significantly declined, partly because of changing patterns of society worldwide in the course of modernization and globalization, and partly also because of the fact that “the traditional rulers are viewed as collaborating with the oil companies and the political elite for their own personal benefit” (UNDP, 2006: 42). The consequence according to Obi (2006: 41-42) has been “a change in the principal actors of resistance and struggle in the Niger Delta, who are now younger, mostly male actors”. They are generally more prone to violence, especially given the high level of unemployment in the Delta and the fact that without the social support of traditional family structures, the young people are hit even harder by the endemic unemployment.

Nigeria is not only ethnically and religiously fragmented society, but is also marked by “the fragmentation of its political structure”, something which results in the “persistent weakness of the political institutions” (Lewis, 2007: 282). Reinforced by the tri-regional colonial rule and the existing cultural fragmentation, the weakness of the political system was not completely remedied when Nigeria became independent in 1960. Hence, Brunner (2002: 132) has rightly observed that, the historically weak political institutions, which undermined the effectiveness of the political output has also “reduced Nigeria’s capacity to provide internal stability”. Furthermore, the rudimentary political institutions were further destroyed and delegitimized by the successive military regimes, which also reinforced identity politics and paternalistic political rule. The military dictators, especially, Babangida and Abacha used the oil revenue to co-opt the traditional rulers in order to bolster their political legitimacy, thereby fostering a prebendal and clientele culture in the Nigerian society.

Despite the institutional weakness, violent state repression under military rule was obviously “one of the factors limiting the occurrence of more violent protests and broader social conflicts in the Niger Delta until the end of the 1990s” (Hazen & Horner, 2007: 72). Brutal repression also helps to explain the relatively rapid

abatement of the Ogoni protests in the middle of the 1990s. Consequently, many studies emphasize that the escalation of violence in the Niger Delta occurred parallel to the process of democratization in the late 1990s (Hazem & Horner, 2007,10; World Bank, 2003: 225).

Indeed, there have been two main mechanisms through which democratization has contributed to the escalation of violence in the Delta. First, since 1999 there has generally been less governmental repression, thereby increasing the opportunity for activists and militants to easily mobilize for protests and other kinds of violent struggles. Although violent, and sometimes excessively violent repression by security forces is still occurring in the Niger Delta, this repression is more selective and inconsistent for example, because of the collaboration of security forces with some of the activists and militants, because of the security forces’ themselves participation in the illegal oil and weapons trade, and because the security forces lack resources and skills to efficiently handle crisis. As a result, governmental repression, rather than curbing violence, is fostering counter-violence activities in the Niger Delta.

Secondly, since 1999 when Nigeria returned to partisan democracy, politicians have on a large scale recruited mostly unemployed youths in the Niger Delta. These unemployed youths were “provided with weapons to protect themselves, to fight political opponents, and to intimidate potential voters to vote for the right candidate”. The weapons that were allocated to “these youths were for the most part never returned” (Hazem & Horner, 2007: 13-14 and Human Rights Watch, 2004: 2) By implication, it means that, there are a considerable number of well-armed, disillusioned youths, many of whom were dismissed after the elections as the politicians no longer had any use for them. For example, the powerful militant leaders Ateke Tom (head of the Niger Delta Vigilante) and Alhaji Asari Dokubo (head of the Niger Delta People’s Volunteer Force) were according to Lubeck, Watts & Lippschutz (2007: 8) “actively deployed (and paid) by high ranking politicians to be political thugs during elections”.

Due to the weakness of the political institutions, informal arrangements and particularly non-state actors have become “very important people” in the Nigerian politics. Special attentions in the context of the surge in electoral violence in Nigeria since 1999 should therefore also be directed at the so-called godfathers who are not democratically legitimate, but in practice, they exercise political influence in Nigeria because they are wealthy and socially powerful individuals. They support political candidates, frequently making use of violence, and in return demand to have control over political decisions and to receive personal benefits or political protection for their illegal activities. (Walker 2008). Godfatherism can be considered to be “both a symptom and a cause of the violence and corruption that together permeate the political process in Nigeria” and particularly in



the Niger Delta (HRW, 2007: 34). Within this vicious circle, godfatherism further reduces the legitimacy of government and perpetuates the political culture of irresponsible leadership.

The absence of a viable system of political parties is another symptom of the failure of the democratic political institutions in Nigeria. For example, most of the unambiguously formed political parties hardly have defined political manifestoes and ideology. But rather, are formed to serve or facilitate corruption and patronage networks. To be more specific, PDP's dominant control of the machinery of government at the centre and at the other tiers of government, by implication means, it has access to large public funds, which are used to buy political loyalty, to mobilize violence, and to enforce loyalty (Nwankwo, 2003: 138; HRW, 2007: 36). This is not only further undermining the democratic legitimacy of the political elites but also directly contributing to the increase in violence in the Niger Delta. For example, according to Human Rights Watch (2007: 23), armed groups in Rivers state "openly acknowledged that they were sponsored by the PDP to rig the 2003 elections".

Furthermore, the political culture in Nigeria has also been negatively influenced by the many decades of repressive military rule. Consequently, Nigeria is marked not only by weak political institutions but also, in interaction with the latter, by a lack of responsible leadership, especially at the level of the state governors and the local political elites (Ologbenla: 2007). The negative political culture and lack of responsible leadership are evident in "the widespread tendency of elites to use public offices and political power to pursue private interests" (IDEA, 2001: 243). With the civilian democracy, this cupidity has become more publicly evident, and it is therefore increasingly causing anger within the Nigerian population. Although this aspect does not appear to be of primary relevance, it can be regarded as one of the factors indirectly responsible for the increased potential for conflict in recent years.

In a similar way, the escalation of violence in the Niger Delta is related to the military culture that is evident in the Niger Delta policy, which can to a large extent be classified as carrot and stick strategy. For instance, according to Hazen & Horner (2007: 96), the federal government's strategies for the reduction of militancy in the Niger Delta are usually accompanied by "heavy-handed military tactics". The persistent military culture of "high-handedness are easily noticeable in the operational tactics of Nigerian security forces who for decades are being trained in authoritarian practices and therefore remain highly militarized" (Hazen & Horner, 2007: 102). For instance, according to various reports by the Human Right Watch, the Joint Task Force that is composed of the army and police, which have been stationed in the Niger Delta since 2003, is notorious for "its human rights violations, extrajudicial killings, looting and immoderate

use of force" (See 1999a; 1999b; 2002 & 2006). The Odi massacre is a case in point where the Joint Task Force, in 1999 under operation Hakuri II completely razed down the Odi town. Similarly, in February 2005, the Joint Task Force attacked "Odioma communities where they killed at least 17 people, and destroyed the whole the villages" (AI, 2005: 19).

Absence and or lack of physical and socio-economic infrastructures, have in the recent time, increased the frustration of the militants as well as the civil population of the Niger Delta. Especially for the younger generations, the lesson of the Ogoni protests in the middle of the 1990s is that, peaceful protest does not produce any positive results. As Nigeria transited from military to partisan democracy, the Niger Delta communities had high expectations and hopes for the improvement of their socio-economic situation. But this has been largely disappointing, thus, the people's willingness to use violence to achieve what they want has been further strengthened.

The increased supply of potentially militant actors with weapons is one of the crucial factors for the increase in violent struggle since the end of the 1990s. The illegal circulation of weapons is not just by the corrupt and greedy intentions of national politicians and security forces; it also has international dimensions. To Hazen & Horner (2007: 25, 91), "estimates regarding the proliferation of weapons in Nigeria assume the presence of one to three million small arms, majority of them unlicensed and therefore illegal..." Similarly, "community armouries now appear to be a common phenomenon in the Delta".

To some extent, the prevalence of these weapons can be traced back to the Biafra War; while majority of others were imported into the country. The main external sources are said to be "the neighbouring countries, many of which had experienced violent conflicts" (Human Rights Watch 2003: 25). The weapons are brought to Nigeria by Nigerian or foreign arms dealers through the country's very porous frontiers. Particularly important entry points appear to be "the borders with Togo and Benin" (Hazen & Horner, 2007: 34). In Nigeria the weapons are sold directly to the militants, the security forces, governmental agencies, and business people who then pass them on. Weapons also enter the country illegally, albeit to a lesser extent, "through Nigerian soldiers that returned from ECOMOG missions in Liberia and Sierra Leone" (AI, 2005: 36).

In sum, what is clear from the discourse on both the immediate and remote essences of the violence in the Niger Delta above are first, whereas, the immediate causal factors are dominantly violence that arose as result of oil factor, the remote factors on the other hand, are violence that arose as result of weaknesses inherent in Nigeria's political institutions and environment. Secondly, combinations of the negative impacts of both

the immediate and remote factors among others combined to exacerbate and escalate the violence in the Niger Delta. Given the above analysis therefore, the immediate factors (oil issues) could be said, are not the only factors that decisively explain the essence of violence in Nigeria's Niger Delta as the rentier state theory and the resource-curse thesis appear to suggest. But rather, the remote factors, that is, the all the more important weaknesses inherent in Nigeria's political institutions and environment have lately overridden the oil factor motives as the essences of violence in Nigeria's Niger Delta.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This article examined the relevance of the rentier state theory and the resource-curse thesis to explain the essence of the oil resource violence in Nigeria's Niger Delta that has escalated since the second half of the 1990s. On the basis of the discourse, it became clear especially with reference to the immediate causal factors (oil issues) that, the people of the oil producing states are aggrieved and thus resort to violence, and perhaps armed struggle because, the politics of oil revenue allocation have been unfavourable, while at the same time, they are negatively affected by the disastrous ecological and social impacts of oil production. Furthermore, the people of the Niger Delta resort to violent struggle as they are aggrieved about the prevalence of negative socio-economic conditions such as unemployment, corruption, absence of infrastructural developments among others.

Following the discourse of the immediate factors, the remote factors were also critically analysed, and it was noted that the violent conflict in the Niger Delta is traceable to weaknesses of the Nigerian political institutions and environment. For example, weak political institutions and corruption has provided the structural basis for the broad involvement of various groups in oil bunkering and trade in weapons. Similarly, assisted by international actors, who are earning significant profits from the illegal trade, oil bunkering became widespread and an opportunity to eat from the national cake. Thus, because of greed, all the parties involved in the illegal trade are therefore not interested in the end to the violent conflict in the Niger Delta.

In sum therefore, what one can deduce from the foregoing discourse is that, in consonance with the assumptions of the rentier state theory of the state and the resource-curse thesis, a combination of the immediate causal factors, which are predominantly oil oriented grievances are the initial motives for the violent conflict in the Niger Delta. However, on the basis of the discourse, it became clear that, these initial motives alone are not sufficient to exhaustively explain the essence of the violence in the Niger Delta. This is because; significant, but remote causal factors are also relevant to explaining the recurring violent conflict. It is on this note it became

obvious that, the negative impacts of both the immediate and remote factors among others combined to escalate the violence.

In conclusion, given the analysis in this article, there is no doubting the utility of the rentier state theory and the resource-curse approaches to explaining the essence of the violent conflict in Nigeria's Niger Delta. Even though the approaches have or are expected to be universally valid, nevertheless, their potential to exhaustively explain the essence of the escalating violence in the Niger Delta, depend decisively on other salient factors. Therefore, the limitation in the assumptions of these approaches are by implication, a suggestion of the necessity to revise the embedded assumptions, as some salient factors which were over-looked by these established theoretical approaches are considered germane to explaining the essence of an equivalent of Nigeria's own version of the "new war" that is spreading across the length and breath of the world.

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