



## Reports

### **The Resurgence of Militancy in Nigeria's Oil-Rich Niger Delta and the Dangers of Militarisation**

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A view of the Swali market by the River Nun, in Yenagoa, the capital of Nigeria's oil state of Bayelsa. [Akintunde Akinleye/Reuters]

## Abstract

Renewed attacks by new militant groups in Nigeria's oil-rich Niger Delta region since early this year have reduced Nigeria's oil production to a 22-year low. This report examines the resurgence of militancy in the region, which has become a major security concern. It contends that if President Muhammadu Buhari sticks to his sledge hammer approach, the violence will escalate and the target and tactics of militants may change as well, with dire cascading economic and security consequences for the country.

## Introduction

Since crude oil was first discovered in Oloibiri in 1956, the Niger Delta region has played a pivotal role in the politics, economics, and security of Nigeria. (1) The region's estimated 37.2 billion barrels of proven oil reserves and 188 trillion standard cubic feet of natural gas are the largest hydrocarbon deposits in Africa. (2) Oil exploitation has become central to the state economy, accounting for some 80 percent of government revenue, 95 percent of foreign exchange earnings, and 40 percent of gross domestic product. (3) In addition to its oil wealth, the Delta region's position on the Atlantic is a critical maritime corridor for Nigeria to move crude to international markets and to import needed goods.

Map of Nigeria showing the constituent states of the Niger Delta Region (4)



Despite the vast wealth created by its petroleum, however, much of the Niger Delta region is characterized by widespread poverty, youth unemployment, political underrepresentation, and environmental degradation. These forces contributed to an outbreak of violence between 2006 and 2009, spearheaded by the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND). A presidential amnesty program helped to end the insurgency and allowed oil production to bounce back, but the quest to sustain security in the Delta has remained a major challenge to successive Nigerian governments.

In mid-2015, the insurgency resurfaced and has become a major security concern to Nigerians, the federal government, regional shipping companies, and international oil interests. Intensified attacks on oil infrastructure by new militant groups such as the Niger Delta Avengers (NDA) have reduced Nigeria's output to a 22-year low. President Muhammadu Buhari has responded by directing the military to "crush" the NDA, resulting in a heightened military presence across the Delta region. There is growing concern that further escalation of violence could cripple oil production, with dire, cascading economic and security consequences for the country. This report therefore

examines the resurgence of militancy in the region, highlighting its implications for Nigeria. The report concludes with recommendations for a prudent course of action by the Nigerian government.

## **Background to the resurgence of militancy**

Following the return to democracy in 1999, tension has grown across the Niger Delta region over the management of oil exploitation and the distribution of oil wealth. These tensions erupted into violence in 2006 when militants protesting the marginalization of the region bombed several critical oil installations and kidnapped expatriate oil workers. These attacks claimed several lives and nearly crippled Nigeria's oil production and export capacity.

The insurgency came to an end when President Yar'Adua offered amnesty, vocational training, and monthly cash payments to nearly 30,000 militants, at a yearly cost of about \$500 million. This program brought relative peace to the region, and petroleum exports increased from about 700,000 barrels per day (bpd) in mid-2009 to about 2.4 million bpd in 2011. Several ex-militant leaders such as Asari Dokubo, Gen. Ebikabowei "Boyloaf," Victor Ben, Ateke Tom, and Government Ekpumopolo (alias Tompolo) were rewarded with lucrative contracts to guard pipelines. The amnesty program was intended to end in December 2015, but was later extended to December 2017 by President Buhari.

Despite the program's early success, however, tensions resurfaced following President Buhari's May 2015 inauguration speech, which revealed his plans to significantly curtail the program. In June 2015, President Buhari terminated the ex-militants' pipeline security contracts and the government began prosecution against the former militant leader, Tompolo, for contract fraud. At the same time, President Buhari cut funding for the amnesty program by around 70 percent in the 2016 budget, citing corruption. With these developments, coupled with the government's ongoing failure to properly address local grievances in the Delta region, it was only a matter of time before another wave of militancy would resurface.

## **The new wave of militancy and President Buhari's reaction**

In January 2016, unknown criminal elements began attacking oil facilities in the Niger Delta region. In response, President Buhari vowed to deal decisively with the resurgence of oil theft, sabotage of pipelines, and general insecurity. (5) His threat did not deter the

emergence of a new militant separatist group, the NDA, which proclaimed its formation on 3 February 2016. Since then, the group has carried out numerous high-profile attacks on oil facilities across the region. (6)

Several notable attacks are worth highlighting. On 10 February, NDA militants blew up the Bonny Soku Gas Line, which carries natural gas to the Nigeria Liquefied Natural Gas plant, and an independent power plant at Gbaran. On 13 February, the NDA launched its “Operation Red Economy” with a 14-day ultimatum to the central government to respond to its demands. (7) The following day, the NDA carried out a devastating attack on one of the most strategic pipelines in the nation’s energy network, the Trans Forcados Pipeline (TFP), which transports oil, water, and associated gas from fields in the western Delta to the 400,000 bpd Forcados oil terminal. Ten days later, on 23 February, the NDA reissued its warning that it will continue hitting oil facilities until the government addresses its grievances. On 4 May 2016, NDA militants struck again, blowing up the Chevron Valve Platform located in the Delta state of Warri. The next day, it carried out another attack on the Chevron Well D25 in Abiteye along with gas lines feeding the Warri and Kaduna refineries.

While claiming responsibility for the attacks, the group’s spokesman, Madoch Agbinibo, boasted that “now, we are taking the fight out of the creeks of the Niger Delta. We are taking it to Abuja and Lagos.” (8) Although there is no credible intelligence suggesting that the NDA has the logistical and operational capacity to mount such attacks, militants have in the past extended their geographic reach as far as Lagos in southwest Nigeria. The July 2009 attack on Atlas Cove jetty in Lagos by MEND is a precedent.

While some have attributed the recent violence to President Buhari’s handling of the amnesty program, others have blamed Tompolo—the ex-militant leader currently being prosecuted in absentia on corruption charges. Tompolo, however, has disassociated himself from NDA’s actions. Unlike former Niger Delta militant groups that operated under known leaders, as yet the NDA have no known associations, raising speculation about those behind the violence. The security analyst Dirk Stiffen has speculated that “the NDA are most likely a ‘mouthpiece’ for a yet unorganized number of armed groups in the Niger Delta.” (9) There is concern that inappropriate state responses to this inchoate group may compel it to become more tactically organized, operationally sophisticated, and strategically oriented.

Already, the group’s ability to attack critical nodes of Nigeria’s oil infrastructure is attracting serious attention. President Buhari has reacted with an aggressive posture,

directing the military to “crush the new militant group.” (10) Emboldened by the directive, the military has boasted that it “will employ all available means and measures within its Rules of Engagement to crush any individual or group that engages in the destruction of strategic assets and facilities of the government in the Niger Delta or any other location.” (11) The military has already made incursions into several communities in the region in a futile hunt for the militants behind the new wave of attacks.

While the military was scouring the region for militants affiliated with the NDA, a new militant group, the Red Egbesu Water Lions (REWL), surfaced on 19 May 2016. This new group stated it was teaming with the NDA and the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB). The REWL gave the government a seven-day ultimatum to meet its demands, which included the release of Nnamdi Kanu, the detained leader of IPOB. (12)

The government counter-offensive is taking place on water as well as land. On 20 May, President Buhari restated to the Chief of Naval Staff (CNS) his directive to deal ruthlessly with the NDA and other militant groups responsible for the continuing attacks on oil and gas installations in the Delta. Translating the presidential directive into immediate military success will not be easy, given the Nigerian Navy’s lack of suitable vessels. Last year, CNS Vice-Admiral Ibok-Ete Ekwe Ibas lamented that the navy is unable to fulfill its constitutional obligation to defend the country’s territorial waters because more than 50 percent of its fleet is in disrepair due to negligence. (13) Not much has changed since then, as the National Economic Council confirmed in May 2016 that “the government does not have adequate operational vessels to patrol and secure the network of pipelines in the Niger Delta.” (14) Therefore, deploying the military into the region’s difficult terrain without the right mix of equipment and forces could turn a minor assignment into a monumental disaster.

If President Buhari sticks to his sledgehammer approach, some analysts believe it is “likely that violence will escalate in the Niger Delta as the government increases its military presence and the militants respond with further attacks.” (15) Conceivably, the target and tactics of militants may change as well, perhaps focusing on high value targets such as foreign oil workers and oil vessels, or carrying out a campaign of intimidation against locals to deter collaboration with the military. Any confrontation between the new militants and local detractors would further complicate the insecurity in the region. Although it is unlikely that the region will witness the intensity of violence of the 2006-2009 insurgency, it is obvious that each successful attack by new militant groups further chokes Nigeria’s economic windpipe.

## **Impact of renewed militancy in the Niger Delta**

The renewed attacks by militant groups not only undermine Nigeria's economic stability, but also risk exacerbating maritime insecurity in the Gulf of Guinea (GoG).

Owing to recent attacks on critical infrastructure, Nigeria's oil production has plummeted from 2.2 million bpd to about 1.4 million bpd. (16) Nigeria is already losing about N2.79 billion (\$14 billion) daily to the closure of the ExxonMobil-operated Qua Iboe terminal, following the evacuation of Exxon-Mobil's workers. This has compounded government revenue losses caused by the fall in global oil prices since mid-2014.

In addition to crippling oil exports, the the new wave of militancy in the Delta has also choked the supply of gas to local power plants, thus hobbling Nigeria's power grid. Electricity generation in Nigeria has declined from about 4,800 megawatts in August 2015 to 1,000 megawatts in May 2016, (17) seriously undermining overall productivity and service delivery in the economy.

The renewed violence has also impacted maritime security in the GoG. Pirate attacks emanating from the Niger Delta remain a major threat to the oil industry in Nigeria and merchant shipping in the GoG. An estimated 70 percent of all piracy-related incidents in the GoG are directly related to Nigerian criminal gangs, mostly originating from the Niger Delta. In the first quarter of 2016, at least 12 attacks were recorded in the Gulf of Guinea, including nine in Nigeria, one in Côte d'Ivoire, and two within the territorial waters of the DR Congo. (18) Should the cycle of violence escalate, it is likely that the NDA and other similar groups could increase attacks on vessels and offshore facilities. Consequently, the interests of foreign investors will be further compromised as their facilities come under destructive attack, their staff threatened, and safe navigation in the GoG undermined by militant pirates.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The desire to restore stability in the Niger Delta to ensure steady revenue inflow to government coffers has compelled President Buhari to charge the military to crush renewed militancy in the region. The military has dispatched reinforcements to the region, but has registered very little success in terms of stopping explosive attacks on oil and gas facilities. The British Foreign Minister, Philip Hammond, has admonished President Buhari to avoid a military confrontation that could end in a "disaster." (19) To

avoid further escalation of violence, President Buhari should leverage other non-kinetic measures. The president will do well to undertake the following actions:

- Release a strongly worded presidential statement reaffirming the government's commitment to the economic development of the Niger Delta region—a development plan that clearly outlines the closure of the 2009 amnesty program.
- Convene a strategic regional summit to offer relevant stakeholders the opportunity to chart a roadmap for diffusing the simmering tension.
- Ensure the prompt release of funds for infrastructure development in the region to stimulate economic activities and job creation.
- Support greater dialogue between Niger Delta communities and multinational oil companies to create mechanisms for the genuine resolution of disputes.
- Direct the military to strictly comply with the rules of engagement in the conduct of operations against criminal elements in the region.
- Equip the military with the materiel and facilities necessary for achieving maritime security and for better intelligence-gathering in the region.

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