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### NGA101034.E

Nigeria: Egbesu Boys; leadership, membership, recruitment practices, activities, and treatment by authorities (January 2005 - February 2006)  
Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

### The Egbesu Boys

The Egbesu Boys, also referred to as the Egbesu Boys of Africa (*WAR* 2002, 7; CDCMS 2003, 44; COAV 30 May 2005, 249; AI Nov. 2002, 15;), first emerged in the early 1990s (*ibid.*). Named after "Egbesu," [also spelled "Egbisu" (BBC 4 Oct. 2004a; *The Herald* 29 Sept. 2004)] the Ijaw god of war (Denmark Jan. 2005, 15; CDCMS 2003, 44; BBC 4 Oct. 2004a), the group began as a religious cultural group of the Ijaw people but

subsequently took up arms in order to challenge perceived injustice caused by the exploitation of oil resources in Ijaw land and the Niger Delta by the Nigerian state and multinational corporations (SAS May 2005, 18).

Various sources identify the Egbesu Boys as the militant wing of the Ijaw Youth Council (IYC) (COAV 30 May 2005, 250; Denmark Jan. 2005, 15; *WAR* 2002, 7; CDCMS 2003, 44), the "umbrella association of civil and youth groups in the Ijaw Nation" (*ibid.*, 47). The militant group has also been associated with the Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force (NDPVF) (CIDCM May 2005, 82; *The Guardian* 25 Sept. 2004; CDCMS 2003, 49), one of the "most powerful militias" in the Niger Delta region (*The Guardian* 25 Sept. 2004).

The Egbesu Boys are active across the six southeastern states of Nigeria's Niger Delta Region (Nigeriaworld 14 Jan. 2005; COAV 30 May 2005, 249): Ondo; Edo; Delta; Bayelsa; Rivers; and Akwa Ibom (Nigeriaworld 14 Jan. 2005). The group's traditional headquarters are located in Amabulou [also spelled "Amabolou" (Legal Oil 24 Nov. 2005)], in Ekeremor Local Government Area, Bayelsa State (CDCMS 2003, 45; Legal Oil 24 Nov. 2005).

### Leadership

According to a 2003 Centre for Development and Conflict Management Studies (CDCMS) report, the head of Egbesu is the chief priest of the Egbesu shrine (2003, 45). This priest is responsible for "communing with, and speaking on behalf of the deity and initiates, and also providing spiritual protection and guidance to the initiated" (*ibid.*, 44). The high priest is consulted before and during major Egbesu Boys operations (*ibid.*, 45). The executive of the Egbesu Boys of Africa (EBA) is made up of assistants of the chief priest (*ibid.*, 45).

Contrary to the findings of the CDCMS, a 2005 Small Arms Survey (SAS) research paper reports that, although the chief priest may be consulted regarding

operations of the Egbesu Boys, he is not necessarily the leader of the group (May 2005, 335). According to a Niger Delta Youth Movement representative interviewed for the SAS research, the only leader of the Egbesu Boys died in 2001 and was never replaced (ibid., 335-336).

Two sources consulted by the Research Directorate identified Dokubo Asari as the leader of the Egbesu Boys (Denmark Jan. 2005, 16; *The Guardian* 25 Sept. 2004). Asari is the founder of the Ijaw Youth Council (IYC) (BBC 4 Oct. 2004b) and the leader of the Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force (UN 17 Jan. 2006; *Global Security* 27 Apr. 2005; *The Herald* 29 Sept. 2004), and is considered the "delta's most influential militia leader" (UN 17 Jan. 2006).

The Egbesu consists of various organizations and groups, the leaders of which form the Supreme Egbesu Assembly (SEA) (CDCMS 2003, 45). Correspondence from the Secretary General of the Ijaw Youth Council in May 2000 indicated that the SEA is the spiritual arm of the Ijaw Youth Council, and the president of the IYC is the overall head of the SEA (IYC 13 May 2000). No further information on the SEA could be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate.

Leadership within the Egbesu Boys is elected, and "decisions are taken democratically" (CDCMS 2003, 83).

## **Membership and Recruitment Practices**

Research conducted by SAS in 2005 found that "the Egbesu deity continues to exert a powerful hold on unemployed Ijaw youth" (May 2005, 336). Correspondence from the Secretary General of the Ijaw Youth Council (IYC) in 2000 indicated that "[m]embers are recruited normally only if [they] are an Ijaw person" and that "[e]very Ijaw man and woman is a member by birth" (IYC 13 May 2000).

In terms of the number of members involved in the Egbesu Boys, the Research Directorate found differing information: while one source indicated that the Egbesu Boys were made up of approximately "5,000 Ijaw youth members" (COAV 30 May 2005, 250), another source indicated that the militia group had "hundreds of fighters" (*The Guardian* 25 Sept. 2004).

Most Egbesu Boys are members of other ethnic militias (CDCMS 2003, 81), "drawn from already existing groups in the [Niger-Delta] region" (COAV 30 May 2005, 250). Membership in the Egbesu Boys is voluntary, and members are, "in theory," free to "disengage" from the group as they wish (CDCMS 2003, 82).

There is no specific age for joining the Egbesu Boys; however, most members first join the militia group at the age of sixteen (COAV 30 May 2005, 254). A number of youths initially join the Egbesu Boys as informants and are later initiated into the group (ibid., 254-255).

Recruitment of the Egbesu Boys is followed by the registration and initiation of members into the group (ibid., 254). Formal initiation into the Egbesu Boys is conducted by the High Priest (ibid., 254). Initiation of members involves the "scarring" (ibid., 254) or the incision of "ritual marks and other symbols ... on their bodies" (CDCMS 2003, 46), the sprinkling with or bathing in "Egbesu water," and "an invocation of the Egbesu spirit" (COAV 30 May 2005, 254).

During militant operations, members of the Egbesu Boys generally carry guns and ammunition and wear red or white headbands (CDCMS 2003, 46). Egbesu Boys also wear leaves on their heads (*The Herald* 29 Sept. 2004; BBC 4 Oct. 2004a), or carry them in their pockets, or under their hats (ibid.) to protect them in battle. If a member of the group is killed in battle, despite carrying a leaf, "[the death] is blamed

on their having committed 'impure deeds'" (ibid.). According to 2000 correspondence from the Secretary General of the Ijaw Youth Council (IYC), such deeds include "having sex, going to the battle field when your wife is pregnant, stealing, killing, etc." (IYC 13 May 2000).

Egbesu Boys are "expected to be disciplined and are bound by certain rules and regulations concerning morality and general conduct" (CDCMS 2003, 46). Discipline within the group is maintained through fines, suspensions, and "sometimes ... some form of physical or other related punishment" (ibid., 83).

## **Activities**

According to a 2003 research report by the Centre for Development and Conflict Management Studies,

"[i]t is difficult to assign any specific actions or encounters to Egbesu Boys because their members in different militant organizations undertake most of the militant actions of the Ijaws towards the State, oil companies and other ethnic groups" (ibid., 46)

However, there are reports of members of the Egbesu Boys being involved in the kidnapping of oil workers (COAV 30 May 2005, 256; Nigeriaworld 14 Jan. 2005), the sabotage of oil installations (ibid.; CIDCM May 2005, 82), as well as attacks on Nigerian authorities (COAV 30 May 2005, 256; Nigeriaworld 14 Jan. 2005). The Egbesu Boys have also been involved in conflicts with the Itsekiri ethnic group in the Niger-Delta region (SAS May 2005, 335).

There have also been reports of Egbesu Boys, among other militant groups, being used by politicians to "assassinate political enemies" (Denmark Jan. 2005, 16) and to "settl[e] political scores" (Nigeriaworld 14 Jan. 2005). The Egbesu Boys have been described as one of the "most daring" Ijaw youth groups (Global Security 27 Apr. 2005) and "more dangerous" than other armed groups in Nigeria, such as the Bakassi Boys (Denmark Jan. 2005, 15). It is believed that sources of funding to the Egbesu Boys include oil bunkering (ibid.), as well as "highly influential members of the community" (COAV 30 May 2005, 250), which allow the group to buy its weapons (ibid., 251; Denmark Jan. 2005, 15).

According to a representative of Nigeria's National Human Rights Commission consulted for the British-Danish Fact-finding Mission to Abuja and Lagos, Nigeria, members of the Egbesu Boys are "responsible for serious crimes against civilians" (Danish Immigration Service Jan. 2005, 16). Research conducted during 2005 also suggests that, while the militant group may have the support of some community members, the attitudes of many in the community towards the Egbesu Boys are "characterised by fear and helplessness" (COAV 30 May 2005, 250).

## **Treatment of Egbesu Boys by the Authorities**

In September 2005 (UN 17 Jan. 2006), Dokubo Asari, the alleged leader of the Egbesu Boys (Denmark Jan. 2005, 16; *The Guardian* 25 Sept. 2004), was arrested by the Nigerian authorities on charges of treason (*Vanguard* 11 Nov. 2005; UN 17 Jan. 2006) and in January 2006 remained in custody (ibid.).

A 2005 COAV report indicated that the Egbesu Boys have experienced armed confrontations with the Nigerian Authorities (COAV 30 May 2005, 251), who have started using "sophisticated weapons" against the group (ibid., 256).

*The Report on Human Rights Issues in Nigeria: Joint British-Danish Fact-Finding Mission to Abuja and Lagos, Nigeria* reported that, according to a representative of a

human rights organization in Nigeria, members of the Egbesu Boys seeking refugee status in another country

should they be returned to Nigeria, would be at risk of persecution from their own groups as these may seek revenge if they are considered deserters... [and it is] unlikely that any authority would protect such a person (Denmark January 2005, 16).

No further information on the treatment of members of the Egbesu Boys by the authorities from 2005 to 2006 could be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate.

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of additional sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

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## **Additional Sources Consulted**

**Oral Sources:** The Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD) and Small Arms Survey (SAS) did not provide information within the time constraints of this Response.

**Internet sites, including:** Africa Confidential, AllAfrica.com, European Country of Origin Information (ECOI) Network, Human Rights Watch (HRW), International Crisis Group (ICG), Jeune Afrique, Norwegian Refugee Council, United Kingdom Home Office, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, United Nations of the High Commissioner of Human Rights, U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI), United States Department of State.

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