



## RESPONSES TO INFORMATION REQUESTS (RIRs)

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16 June 2009

### NGA103175.E

Nigeria: Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND); whether it forcibly recruits its members and, if so, how; whether members are only from the Ijaw ethnic group (2006 - May 2009)

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The Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) is one of the "most visible" armed groups based in Nigeria's Niger Delta region (BBC 18 May 2009; STRATFOR 17 Mar. 2009; Small Arms Survey Dec. 2007, 123). It emerged in late 2005-early 2006, targeting the oil infrastructure in the area, and abducting and holding oil workers for ransom (STRATFOR 17 Mar. 2009; *ibid.* 19 Mar. 2009; Small Arms Survey Dec. 2007, 123; Lionberger 2007, 75; Jamestown Foundation 26 Apr. 2009). The group claims to be fighting for local control of oil resources in the region (*Daily Trust* 23 May 2009; BBC 18 May 2009; *ibid.* 15 May 2009; International Crisis Group 28 Sept. 2006, 5). However, it has also been accused of being engaged in criminal activities, committing acts of extortion and stealing oil for its own benefit (BBC 18 May 2009; *ibid.* 15 May 2009; STRATFOR 17 Mar. 2009).

Multiple sources consulted by the Research Directorate note MEND's "secretive" nature and the scarce amount of information available on the group's organizational structure, leadership and membership numbers (*Daily Trust* 23 May 2009; STRATFOR 17 Mar. 2009; Council on Foreign Relations 22 Mar. 2007; Lionberger 2007, 77, 85). Various sources note that multiple groups or regional factions may be operating either independently or autonomously under the MEND name or that MEND itself may be an umbrella coalition of different groups (STRATFOR 19 Mar. 2009; Small Arms Survey Dec. 2007, 81, 124-126; Lionberger 2007, 73; BBC 10 May 2007). Ike Okonta, a Fellow at Oxford University and the author of *Behind the Mask: Explaining the Emergence of the MEND Militia in Nigeria's Oil-Bearing Niger Delta*, interviewed some of its declared members directly and describes MEND as

not so much an "organisation" but an idea in which many civic, communal, and political groups, each with its own local specificity and grievances, have bought into. (Okonta 2006, Sec. 4)

### Recruitment

Information on forcible recruitment of MEND members could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

Militias in the Niger Delta reportedly do not have difficulties recruiting members due to socio-economic and political reasons, notably high levels of youth unemployment (Upstream 4 Feb. 2009; UN 1 Feb. 2008; *ibid.* 24 July 2007; Council on Foreign Relations 22 Mar. 2007; Small Arms Survey Dec. 2007, 83). According to a 2006 unpublished Academic Associates PeaceWorks (AAPW) survey cited by Small

Arms Survey, armed groups in the Niger Delta often recruit locally, with most groups consisting of "members from a specific community or, in the case of larger groups, from within the state of origin of the group" (Dec. 2007, 83). Membership in Niger Delta groups such as MEND is reputed to be fluid, with militants involved with several groups simultaneously or concurrently (*Daily Trust* 23 May 2009; Jamestown Foundation 26 Apr. 2007).

Jomo Gbomo, a spokesperson for at least one MEND faction, indicates that the group's members are "volunteers" (*The Guardian* 21 Mar. 2006; see also CEHRD 2008, 47). A PhD candidate in Anthropology from Tulane University who conducted field work in the Niger Delta explained to the Research Directorate that while there are "some pressures" to join depending on the leadership of each member faction, she had not heard of forced recruitment by MEND (28 May 2009).

## **Ijaw Members**

A majority of MEND members are reported to be from the Ijaw ethnic group (Okonta 2006; Council on Foreign Relations 22 Mar. 2007; Small Arms Survey Dec. 2007, 124; Lionberger 2007, 73-74), which is the largest ethnic group in the Niger Delta (*Daily Trust* 23 May 2009; Small Arms Survey Dec. 2007, 123). The Jamestown Foundation, a research institution based in Washington, DC, indicates that MEND, which draws members from communities across the Niger Delta, differs from other cults and ethnic militias "placing its struggle in a social rather than ethnic context" (26 Apr. 2007). According to Small Arms Survey, despite MEND's strong Ijaw ethnic militia membership, it "has been diluted by the inclusion of non-Ijaw groups under the MEND name" (Dec. 2007, 123). However, media sources and the Nigerian Military's Joint Task Force (JTF) often identify MEND and its supporters as an "Ijaw group" (*Daily Trust* 23 May 2009; *The Guardian* 21 Mar. 2006; *Vanguard* 21 Feb. 2009).

In May 2009, the Joint Task Force was accused by MEND and the Ijaw National Congress of indiscriminately targeting Ijaw communities and civilians causing large-scale casualties during operations against Niger Delta militants and their training camps (BBC 18 May 2009; Afrique en ligne 21 May 2009; Xinhua 24 May 2009). The JTF denied the allegations, but MEND threatened to retaliate and declared "all-out war" (BBC 18 May 2009; Afrique en ligne 21 May 2009; Xinhua 24 May 2009; *ibid.* 15 May 2009).

According to the PhD student in Anthropology who conducted field work in the Niger Delta among the Ijaw, while the majority of MEND are Ijaw, MEND also has members from Ogoni, Urhobo, and Itsekiri groups (28 May 2009).

In an interview with the leader of the Ijaw Youth Council published in the Nigeria-based newspaper *Vanguard*, the interviewer stated that MEND claimed "that it is not an Ijaw group, [but] that it is a pan-Niger-Delta group with volunteers from Ijaw, Urhobo, Itsekiri, Ikwerre and other ethnic groups in the region" (*Vanguard* 21 Feb. 2009). While discussing MEND in an interview posted on the United Ijaw States website, Kingsley Kuku, a prominent Ijaw politician, also corroborated the presence of Itsekiri and Urhobo members, while adding that he believed that youths from the Isoko ethnic group were also members (United Ijaw States 21 Apr. 2009).

In the same interview, Kuku also stated that "even Yoruba youths" are affiliated with MEND (United Ijaw States 21 Apr. 2009). In Nigeria, the Yoruba are primarily located in the country's southwest, rather than the southern Niger Delta region (*Encyclopædia Britannica Online* 2009; US Apr. 2009). The PhD student also noted that she had been told of members from other non-Delta Nigerian ethnicities in the organization, but she could not confirm this information (28 May 2009).

While sources report that there is broad support for MEND from the Ijaw community and other groups throughout the Niger Delta (Small Arms Survey Dec. 2007, 124; Okonta Dec. 2006; BBC 10 May 2007), some Ijaw groups and leaders have publicly dissociated themselves from the organization because of its use of violence (*Daily Trust* 23 May 2009; International Crisis Group 30 Apr. 2009, 3-4; *Vanguard* 21 Feb. 2009).

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 sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

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### **Additional Sources Consulted**

**Oral Sources:** Attempts to reach a professor at Obafemi Awolowo University in Ile-Ife, Nigeria were unsuccessful.

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