

Delta minority groups

Profile

The Niger Delta, a lush region of mangrove swamps, rainforest and swampland, is home to several million people. Delta minority groups include Andoni, Brass, Dioubu, Etche, Ijaw, Kalibari, Nembe, Ogoni and Okrika.

The Niger Delta is the main oil-producing region of Nigeria, which is the largest oil producer in Africa and produces one-tenth of the world's crude oil. Little of the wealth created by oil is distributed within the Niger Delta, or to the Nigerian people as a whole. Economic and social rights, such as the right to health and the right to an adequate standard of living, remain unfulfilled for many Nigerians. The Nigerian Federal Government is the prime beneficiary of the revenue earned from selling the crude oil abroad. As the international oil prices have risen, the state's share of the total oil revenue increases under a formula with companies but the Federal Government has invested little of these resources in the Niger Delta. Poverty in this area is widespread; transport infrastructure is poor, electricity provision is low and water and sanitation poor. Oil exploitation has left large areas of the Niger Delta contaminated by gas flares, spills and leakages and unusable for farming.

Historical context

By 1990 communities of Delta minority groups that had remained in poverty for years decided to take action against the exploitation of their resources that had left a legacy of polluted soil and water, rusting pipelines criss-crossing farmland, oil spillages and continual gas flares. In that year people of the Etche group demonstrated peacefully against Shell Oil in the village of Umuechen. Shell called for police protection in case of further action. The Mobile Police Force proceeded to massacre 80 people and destroy 495 homes. Although an inquiry blamed the police, local people held Shell responsible for not negotiating. Since then, protesters have met with similar and sometimes more severe brutality. Over the course of the 1990s, opposition to the federal government and oil companies became increasingly radicalized and militant.

The Ogoni, who live in the north-eastern fringes of the Delta, began a campaign calling for the cleanup of environmental damage, greater revenue from oil production and political autonomy. Their Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) issued an Ogoni Bill of Rights, which demanded immediate compensation for ecological damage from Shell and self-determination for Ogoniland. MOSOP was originally an umbrella organization that united traditional chiefs and intellectuals, such as writer, entrepreneur and former cabinet minister of Rivers State Ken Saro-Wiwa. It came under severe pressure from the military government, and its leaders were detained and harassed.

When elections were being discussed in May 1994 for representatives to a national constitutional conference, splits in the Ogoni community erupted. Four chiefs, including a former vice-president of MOSOP, were murdered. The military regime charged Saro-Wiwa with murder, although clear evidence indicated a solid alibi. The military claimed that he, along with eight other Ogoni activists, incited the

killers. The authority which confirmed the conviction was Sani Abacha's Provisional Ruling Council, the ruling junta. Nigeria received international condemnation following the execution of Saro-Wiwa and the other eight activists on 10 November 1995 after a show trial. Nigeria was suspended from the Commonwealth and given two years to restore democracy or face total expulsion.

The Ijaw, Nigeria's fourth largest ethnic group, also became more militant in the late 1990s, particularly after a centre of local government was moved from the Ijaw town of Ogbe-ijoh to the Itsekiri area of Ogidigben in 1997. In response, the Ijaw formed the Movement for the Survival of the Ijaw Ethnic Nationality.

According to Amnesty International (2004), many of the traditional responsibilities of the state, such as providing basic services are fulfilled in parts of the Niger Delta by transnational oil corporations. For the local communities, the oil companies appear as external players who are taking the wealth from the region, sharing it with the federal government and providing little in return. They are seen as operating on the traditional lands of the communities without consulting them, or consulting them inadequately.

When communities object to specific projects, or ask for more compensation, the companies create divisions within the communities by supporting one faction, usually the chief and groups/gangs associated with the chief, who then forcibly secure the compliance of other community factions who may be opposed to the project. In many instances, the grievances turned into outright antagonism leading to frequent instances of abduction of company officials, sabotage of company property, and violence targeting companies. The companies have turned to the state security forces, which in some cases have used force, often arbitrarily and disproportionately, against individuals. The easy availability of small arms in the region has made the situation more serious. Security forces in the Delta region regularly engage in torture, killings and confiscation of property. Between February and April 2005 thousands of Ogoni and members of other minority communities were evicted from their homes in a Port Harcourt shantytown (Amnesty International, 2006).

The Rivers State government and the Nigerian Agip Oil Company (NAOC) have been accused by the communities of demolishing their waterfront homes to facilitate planned company expansion and relocation from Lagos to Port Harcourt waterside, without notice or compensation. Some residents suffered a second displacement since they were living in the shantytown following earlier destruction of their village homes due to military activities in Ogoni territories.

The demolition was completed in April 2005 despite strong opposition from residents' groups and human rights organizations including the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP). They stated that the shantytown, known as Agip waterside or 'Ogoni Village', had been demolished with inadequate notice and no compensation for residents, many of whom had lived in the shantytown for over 10 years. According to MOSOP, residents have been left to fend for themselves by the Rivers State government, and have been forced to move to other shantytowns or return to villages where their future is uncertain.

Current issues

Militants launched a series of attacks on oil installations in January and February 2006. In April, President Olusegun Obasanjo proposed a 'Marshall Plan' for the Delta, but only with involvement of corrupt local officials and exclusion of many civil society organisations that enjoy credibility in the region. Following further attacks, in August 2006 Obasanjo ordered a crackdown on militants while still pursuing negotiations.

Kidnappings of local and international oil workers have risen steadily, with the militias even resorting to

the kidnapping of children. The situation is complicated by the links that the militias are alleged to have with powerful criminal and political networks. The gangs are known to be actively engaged in oil 'bunkering' - stealing oil from pipelines and using the proceeds to buy arms. Recently, there have been concerns that the oil giants may be further aggravating the problem, by paying off the militants to 'protect' their facilities. The grip of the militants on the area was illustrated in August 2007, when fighting rocked Port Harcourt - Nigeria's main oil city. There were running battles in the street after government troops tried to arrest a prominent Delta militia leader. Criminality is alleged on the side of the military too - with accusations that local military officials are involved with much of the oil sold to Eastern Europe in exchange for weapons.

In this context, new president Umaru Yar'adua appointed Goodluck Jonathan - an Ijaw - as his deputy. Mr Jonathan has already been targeted twice for assassination. The government meanwhile released the detained leader of Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force, Mujahid Dokubo-Asari, and the vice-president embarked upon a series of meetings with leaders of the different communities in the Delta. The main militant group in the Niger Delta, Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) which claims to represent the interests of the Ijaw community, called a ceasefire which held for a few months from June. But by the end of 2007 the group had resumed attacks.