

Resurgence of Militancy in the Niger Delta: Update on the Niger Delta Avengers

June 2016

The agitation for resource control in the Niger Delta developed a violent dimension between 2006 and 2009, when militant groups took over the struggle from the political elites and resorted to violence to express their grievances. The militants resorted to armed struggle with government security forces and triggered a reduction in oil production through kidnapping and hostage taking of expatriate and national oil workers, illegal oil bunkering, and vandalism of oil installations, until the Nigerian government secured a ceasefire through the Presidential Amnesty Program (PAP) in 2009. The PAP ended the insurgency and entitled some militant leaders to lucrative government security contracts to guide oil installations and monthly stipends, while others were provided with scholarships. But barely seven years after many of the militants accepted the PAP and dropped their arms, there has been a resurgence of militancy and violence in the region.

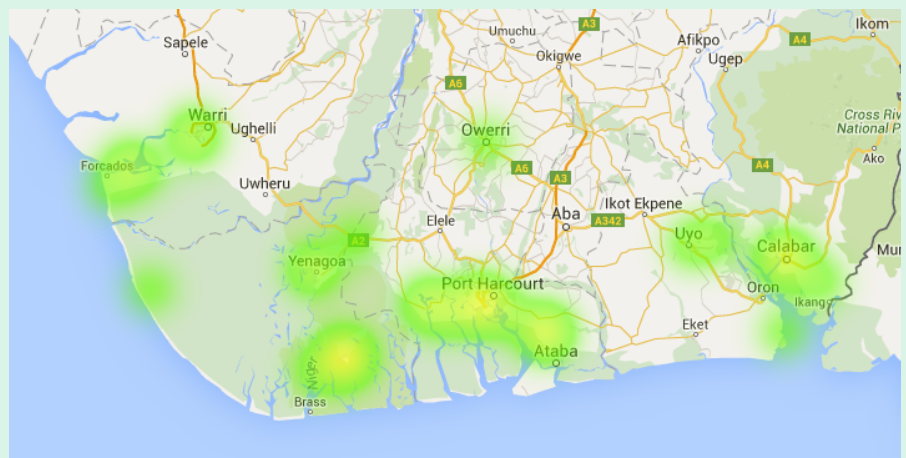
In February 2016, a new militant group, the Niger Delta Avengers (NDA) was launched with the self-stated agenda of crippling the country's crude production. The group carried out its first attack on a gas line on February 10th, 2016. This was followed by other coordinated attacks on oil and gas

installations that has reduced the country's oil and gas production, with a devastating effect on the country's economy. The federal government has responded to the renewed restiveness with mass deployments of security forces, including gunboats, warships and fighter jets in the region. The spate of bombings by militants and the deployment of government security forces have heightened insecurity in the Niger Delta. Allegations of heavy-handed response by the military has caused apprehension among residents of the affected communities. This brief analyses the context of the renewed militancy, its implications for security and the economy, and provides recommendations for stakeholders.

Drivers of the Militant Resurgence

The resurgence of militancy in the Niger Delta can be contextualized amidst the political tensions generated by the outcome of the 2015 presidential elections. The pre-amnesty militants were placated through monthly stipends and pipeline surveillance contracts during the administration of President Goodluck Jonathan. However, since President Muhammadu Buhari came to power in 2015, these pipeline surveillance contracts were cancelled. Further inflaming tensions was the prominent ex-militant leader, Tompolo's indictment as part of the Presidents' anti-corruption campaign over

Heat Map: Concentration of reported Niger Delta militancy incidents



Reported incidents related to militancy in Niger Delta States January 2015—April 2016.
All Sources: P4P Peace Map www.p4p-nigerdelta.org.

Niger Delta Avengers (NDA)

the sale and purchase of a landed property where a Maritime University was built in Delta state. The ongoing saga between Tompolo and the federal government, including his evasion of an arrest warrant and prosecution, has coincided with the emergence of the new militant groups. The groups have called for the de-freezing of Tompolo's bank accounts as one of their conditions of a ceasefire and dialogue with the government.

The recent resurgence of militancy may also be linked to the arrest and detention of Nnamdi Kalu, a popular pro-Biafra activist. One of the militant groups has demanded the immediate release of Nnamdi Kalu as one of its conditions for ceasefire. Although the Niger Delta Avengers are calling for their own sovereign Niger Delta Republic, they also appear to be sympathetic to the agitation for the sovereign state of Biafra. The Niger Delta militants and the various pro-Biafra groups seem to be leveraging the goodwill and relationships that were established between the people of the South-South and the South-East during the Goodluck Jonathan presidency. The militants and the pro-Biafra groups have accused the Buhari Administration of systematic economic and political marginalization and repression of the people of the South-East and the South-South. Any revolutionary collaboration between the militants and the pro-Biafra groups could be dangerous for the federal government and increase insecurity in the region, as the militants could leverage on the internal popularity of Biafra, and the pro-Biafra agitators could capitalize on new strategic locations within the Niger Delta.

Emergence of the NDA

The announcement of the formation of a new militant group, the NDA in February 2016, heralded the return of full-scale militancy in the Niger Delta region. Since its emergence, the group had carried out a string of coordinated attacks on strategic oil and gas installations in the region. The activities of the group have led to a resurgence of unrest in the region, while other groups with similar interests have surfaced with their own demands and attacks on oil facilities. The other militant groups that have emerged include Isoko Liberation Movement, Red Egbesu Water Lions, Suicide Squad, Egbesu Mightier Fraternity, Joint Niger Delta Liberation Force (JNDLF), and the Ultimate Warriors of Niger Delta (UWND). Although these groups appear to be amorphous, they all claim to fight for environmental protection and the economic and political liberation of the region. According to the NDA their "Struggle is focused on the liberation of the People of Niger Delta from decades of divisive rule and exclusion", which they post in statements over their website and popular social media sites such as Twitter

Like the pre-amnesty Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), the NDA appears as a revolutionary umbrella for the other new militant groups in the region. The NDA are more sophisticated than other emergent groups both in terms of their coordination and articulation of their mission. The group has used its online and social media presence to articulate the basis of their vengeance. In one of its public

Timeline of Recent Militant Attacks

February 2016

- ⇒ Feb 10: NDA blew up Bonny Soku Gas Export Line.
- ⇒ Feb 13: NDA attacked SPDC underwater 48-inch crude oil export pipeline at Forcados Export Terminal in Delta state.
- ⇒ Feb 19: NDA bombed the Clough Creek Tebidaba Agip pipeline manifold in Bayelsa State.

May 2016

- ⇒ May 4: NDA attacks a Chevron Valve Platform at Abiteye in Delta State.
- ⇒ May 5: NDA launches a coordinated attack on Chevron's Well D25 in Abiteye and blew up major pipelines in Delta state.
- ⇒ May 13: NDA blew up Chevron pipeline and oil well near a military location in Makaraba in Delta state.
- ⇒ May 17: The Red Egbesu Water Lions blew up the Sagbama-Tuomo gas line belonging to Nigeria Agip Oil Company in Southern Ijaw in Bayelsa state.
- ⇒ May 20: NDA blew up NNPC's Escravos Gas Pipeline in Delta state.
- ⇒ May 22: A militant group attacked a crude oil pipeline belonging to Agip oil Company along the Azuzuama axis of the Tebidaba-Brass pipeline in Bayelsa state.
- ⇒ May 25: NDA attacked a Chevron gas pipeline that provides electricity to the Escravos Tank Farm at Ciera creek in Delta.
- ⇒ May 26: NDA blew up NNPC gas and crude trunk line in Warri, Delta state.
- ⇒ May 27: NDA destroys the Nembe 1, 2 and 3 Brass to Bonny trunk lines belonging to Agip Oil Company and SPDC in Bayelsa state.

June 2016

- ⇒ Jun 1: NDA carried two coordinated attacks on Chevron's Wells RMP 23 and RMP 24 at Dibi in Delta state.
- ⇒ Jun 2: NDA bombed the Ogboinbiri to Tebidaba and the Clough Creek to Tebidaba crude oil pipelines in Bayelsa state.
- ⇒ Jun 2: Militants attacked a boat belonging to NNPC and killed six people comprising four civilians and two soldiers in Warri, Delta state.
- ⇒ Jun 3: NDA blew up SPDC Forcados 48-inch export pipeline in Delta because the company went ahead with repairs against warnings by the militants.
- ⇒ Jun 3: NDA blew up Brass to Tebidaba crude oil lines operated by SPDC and Italy's ENI in Bayelsa state.
- ⇒ Jun 8: NDA attacked Chevron operated RMP 20 well at Egbema in Delta state.
- ⇒ Jun 9: Militants bombed an oil manifold owned by SPDC along Chanomi creek in Ogidigben, Delta state.
- ⇒ Jun 10: NDA bombed the Obi Obi oil trunk line owned by Agip ENI in Bayelsa state.

The Niger Delta Avengers (NDA)

statements termed “Operation Red Economy” the group outlines its grievances, its mission and its approach in the struggle against the government. Although it appears the group has no leadership structure, it has an appointed spokesperson with the stage name of Murdoch Agbinibo, and operates in a guerrilla manner without a known operational base. The NDA also appears to be more sophisticated in their attacks. In one reported incident, they blew up an underwater flow line, an ambitious deep-water assault that requires high-tech equipment and experienced divers. The NDA and other emergent groups have vowed to continue to attack strategic oil and gas infrastructure in the region until their demands are met.

Demands and Grievances

The NDA are angered by the federal government’s lack of “Federal Character” in political appointments as enshrined in the Nigerian constitution. They are also aggrieved by alleged targeting of prominent personalities from the Niger Delta in the Buhari Administration’s anti-corruption campaign, as well as the suspension of key projects in the region. Some of the key demands of the group included:

- Immediate implementation of the report of the 2014 National Conference.
- Change in ownership of oil blocks to reflect 60% for individuals from oil producing regions and 40% for individuals from non-oil producing regions.
- Commencement of academic activities at the Maritime University in Delta state.

- Clean up of Ogoniland and other polluted areas, and payment of compensation to all oil producing communities.
- The release of Nnamdi Kanu, the detained leader of the Indigenous Peoples of Biafra (IPOB).
- Continuation and funding of the Niger Delta Presidential Amnesty Program.

Government Response

The Nigerian government response to the recent surge in militant attacks has predominately focused on a massive deployment of public security forces with a mandate to seek out members of the militant groups. Initially the military had vowed to deploy all available resources measures to deal with the militants. Many residents deserted their homes because of military presence and fighter jets were deployed to the affected communities. Residents have also complained of harassment and indiscriminate arrests by soldiers who are hunting for militants. Based on the allegations of heavy-handed military response to militant attacks, the federal government has ordered the withdrawal of troops from communities. However, soldiers still continue to patrol the waterways.

The activities of the NDA have had a disastrous impact on nation’s economy, which is already struggling with falling global community prices. With crude oil production falling to an all-time low in twenty years, it has become a necessity for the Federal Government to take all necessary steps to enter into dialogue with the armed groups in the Niger Delta, particularly now that the group has heeded the numerous calls for a

ceasefire and has agreed to dialogue with the Federal Government. There are some who believe strongly that the President should take the lead in these dialogues just as former Presidents Obasanjo and Ya’adua before him as a way to show concern for the plight of people of the Niger Delta.

In the August 2015 report published by the Foundation for Partnership Initiatives in the Niger Delta (PIND) titled ‘*Aftermath of Presidential Amnesty Programme in Niger Delta*’ shortly after President Buhari was sworn in, it called for the urgent development of the Niger Delta by the Federal Government as a long term solution to the issues of militancy. That recommendation remains all the more relevant now as the region faces one of the most violent agitations in many years. Although there has been widespread condemnation of the actions of the NDA by the elites and other personalities in the region, there is still pervasive grievances held by local communities at the decades of perceived marginalization and poverty in the region.

Without addressing the underlying drivers of these tensions, there is a higher risk of engendering greater sympathy from communities for the causes of the militant groups.

Recommendations

1. Military deployments

Military deployment to communities of the region will only make the situation worse. While it is understood that the military needs to do all it can to protect Nigeria's oil installations, it is important to note that perceived invasions of communities will only succeed in engendering local support for the militant group agitations.

2. Government goodwill gestures

The Federal Government should take advantage of some low hanging fruits that could put it in some positive light with the people of the region. Some important actions like re-opening the Nigerian Maritime University at Okerenkoko may serve as important steps.

3. Dialogue process

As the dialogue process is about to commence, it is important for the military and indeed the Federal Government to show a sign of good faith by withholding its troops from invading communities or discreetly searching out members of the avengers and other militant groups.

President Buhari should also identify strong personalities to help in the dialogue process. Former President Goodluck Jonathan is well respected in the region and could be very instrumental to bringing calm to the Niger Delta. While there may understandably be a reluctance from the government to leverage on Jonathan's influence in the region, it is important to note the influence and experience he can bring to bear on this situation.