

## 8

## Conflict in Niger Delta: A Unique Case or a 'Model' for Future Conflicts in Other Oil-Producing Countries?

By Thomas A. Imobighe

### 1. Introduction

Conflict can be defined as a condition of disharmony or hostility within a social formation. It is usually the result of a clash of interests between parties involved in some form of relationship. Although conflict represents part of the dynamics of human relations and scholars generally accept its inevitability,<sup>1</sup> the monstrous nature of the conflict in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria with its attendant destruction to human lives and property and the disruption of the country's economy, has once more depicted how dysfunctional conflict can become if it is not properly managed. The Niger Delta region of Nigeria is very strategic to the country's economic survival. This is because Nigeria's main strategic minerals – oil and gas – are concentrated in the region. The Delta accounts for almost all of Nigeria's gas and oil production, which in turn represents 80% of government revenue,<sup>2</sup> 95% of export receipts and 90% of foreign exchange earnings.<sup>3</sup> Since these minerals constitute the country's economic life-wire, the Niger Delta could correctly be regarded as holding the key to Nigeria's economic prosperity and greatness.

While the presence of huge reserves of gas and oil has turned the Niger Delta into the economic "jewel in the Nigerian crown," the exploitation of these resources is not in the hands of the people of the region. Rather, the resources are being exploited for the Nigerian State by foreign multinational corporations (MNCs). Since these MNCs provide the technology for translating the rich resources of the Niger Delta into wealth, they practically control the key to the country's economic prosperity. In the exercise of this onerous responsibility, the MNCs fall under the supervision of the Nigerian State.

---

1 See, among others, John W. Burton, *World Society* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1987), pp137-138; Dudley Weeks, *The Eight Essential Steps to Conflict Resolution* (New York: Tarcher/Putman, 1992), p.ix; and T.A. Imobighe, *The OAU (AU) and OAS in Regional Conflict Management: A Comparative Assessment* (Ibadan: Spectrum Books, 2003), p.xvii.

2 World Bank, Report No. PID11440 (2002), p.1.

3 See T.A. Imobighe et. al. *NIPSS Studies on Nigeria's International Borders, Vol. Five, The Coastal Border* (Kuru: NIPSS Press, 1988), p.2.

Three principal parties are impacted by the oil-related activities in the Niger Delta, namely, the Nigerian State, the multinational oil corporations and the local communities of the Niger Delta region. For the above relationship to be harmonious, the three parties must share in the benefits of the gas and oil wealth. At the moment, it would seem that there is less than adequate concern for the interest of the Niger Delta people by the Nigerian State and the MNCs in the distribution of the benefits of the gas and oil wealth derived from the region. The Niger Delta people strongly believe that the Nigerian State has failed to represent their interest in the manner the prosperity being generated from their place is being distributed and as such would want to take over the control of these resources themselves. Thus the prosperity generated from oil production in the region, instead of creating real wealth for the people of the Niger Delta region, has brought about environmental dislocation, instability, corruption and repression. Oil production in the Niger Delta, instead of spreading contentment and harmony in the region, has brought about frustration and a complex, multi-level conflict, which has persisted for a very long time, and has since March 2003 escalated into an unprecedented inter-communal violence of the most destructive nature. The escalation of violence, which went on intermittently up to the end of August 2003, apart from the loss of hundreds of human lives, led to the disruption of oil production and huge loss in export earnings to the tune of 800,000 barrels per day, which is the equivalent of 40% of Nigeria's total oil production of about 2.2 million barrels per day.<sup>4</sup> Estimating the exact human cost of the perennial conflict in the Niger Delta is extremely difficult. The official estimate of the financial loss is put at about \$3.5 billion annually.<sup>5</sup> Given the fact that Nigeria spends \$2 billion annually to service its external debt, it follows that a resolution of the Niger Delta conflict would save the country more than what she needs to service its external debt. In fact, the country would have additional \$1.5 billion to pursue its developmental programmes and quickly transform the Niger Delta.

An attempt will be made in this paper to analyse the multi-level conflict in the Niger Delta region, with a view to identifying the parties involved, the nature of their involvement, the fundamental issues of the conflict, and the objective conditions in the Niger Delta that help to sustain the conflict. The central questions to be addressed will include: (1) Does the fact that the conflict has persisted for so long mean that the Niger Delta conflict is a unique case of an unmanageable conflict? (2) Are the objective conditions in the Niger Delta that feed on the conflict

---

4 See CSIS, African Notes, Number 16, May 2003, p.1.

5 Nigeria's Minister for Police Affairs gave this estimate, See The Guardian, front page, September 6, 2003.

peculiar to the region? (3) Is the Niger Delta situation a precursor of what to expect from other oil-producing communities? (4) What lessons can be learnt from the conflict?

We will start our analysis by looking critically at the multi-level nature of the conflict to bring out the major role players. Then we will proceed from there to analyse the issues involved and the objective conditions that tend to breed hostility within the region. Finally we will compare these with other oil-producing communities to answer the central question, as to whether we should expect similar hostilities in future from other oil-producing countries that are seemingly peaceful at the moment.

## **2. The Niger Delta Multi-Level Conflict**

The conflict in the Niger Delta is basically an oil-related conflict, which is being played out at different levels of relationship. At one level, is the confrontation between the local communities and the oil companies. At a corresponding level, you have the confrontation between the local communities, especially militant youths, and the Nigerian State authorities. And ironically at the third level, there are widespread hostilities between some of the local communities themselves.

Attendant to the region's multi-faceted conflict is the relatively high level of violence that has now become the hallmark of the Niger Delta region. An important observation to make at this point is that in all of these three levels of conflict, the main instruments of violence have been the marginalised and alienated youth groups in the region. The activities of the aggrieved youths, in the form of pipeline vandalism, oil bunkering, piracy, hostage taking and inter-community hostilities, have often provoked counter-violence of a more destructive type from the country's security forces, such as the one that took place in Odi in Bayelsa State, which led to the complete sacking of the town and the loss of many lives and of properties worth billions of Naira.

### **2.1. The Local Communities Versus Oil Companies<sup>6</sup>**

The conflict between the local communities and the oil companies is traceable to the environmental degradation of the land and water on which the local communities depend for their sustenance. The main companies operating in the area are Shell Petroleum Development Company, ExxonMobil, Chevron-Texaco, ENI, ElfTotalFina and Occidental. These companies operate under a complex system of joint venture agreements they signed with the Nigerian government, which

have detailed the *modus operandi* of their operations in the country. Because these oil companies seem to get away too easily with the degradation they are causing to the ecosystem in the places they operate, the people of the Niger Delta believe that their interests have not been adequately provided for in the so-called joint venture agreements. So they hold the government responsible for the failure to build in a comprehensive programme for environmental restoration in the relevant agreements with the oil companies.

Traditionally, the people of the region earn their living by fishing and farming. Over the years, with the pollution of their water and the devastation of their land as a result of oil spillage and constant gas flaring, they have become increasingly impoverished and have been reduced to the humiliating status of relying on hand-outs from the very oil companies that have been responsible for the destruction of their sources of livelihood. For instance, it has been estimated that more than 2,500 oil spillages occurred in Ogoniland alone between 1986 and 1991.<sup>7</sup> Although the oil companies do not deny the occurrences of oil spillages, they often blame the incidents on sabotage by local communities. Shell, for instance, admitted that 87 spillages occurred in Ogoniland between 1985 and 1993, but insisted that 60 were due to local sabotage. Until 1999, when the country's belated liquefied natural gas project started production, Nigeria was reputed to be the greatest gas-flaring country in the world. In 1982, it flared the equivalent of around 280,000 barrels of crude oil per day. In 1991, Nigeria was known to have exceeded the world average for gas flares by 72%. In that year, Nigeria flared 76% of the gas produced in the country.<sup>8</sup> If this figure is put against the world average of 4% and OPEC average of 18%, the enormity of the financial loss and the damage to the ecosystem of the oil producing communities in the country can best be understood. The oil companies have always insisted that they have fulfilled their responsibilities under the agreements they signed with the Federal government and that beyond that, they have carried out some development programmes in the communities where they operate. They are usually always ready with statistics of the millions of dollars budgeted for local community projects. They are usually quick to point to some of

---

6 This section and subsequent ones benefited from the author's extensive field work spanning over a decade on the conflict situation in the Niger Delta region, which has resulted in some publications and commissioned papers, among which are: T.A. Imobighe et. al., *Conflict and Instability in the Niger Delta: The Warri Case* (Ibadan: Spectrum Books, 2003) and "Conflicts and Conflict Management: The Role of the State and Law Enforcement Agencies in the South-South Zone", commissioned paper presented at the South-South Zonal Conference on Enhancing Peaceful Coexistence in Nigeria, organized by the National War College, Abuja, held at the Hotel Presidential, Port Harcourt, September 1-3, 1998.

7 See Okechukwu Ibeanu, "(Sp)oil of Politics: Petroleum, Politics, and the Illusion of Development in the Niger Delta, Nigeria", in *ACAS Bulletin*, Fall 2002, No. 64, Winter 2002/2003, p.24.

8 *Ibid.*

these donor projects, such as schools, health centres, bore hole water system, etc. For instance, Shell claims that it spends about \$60 million annually in community projects like water, agriculture and health. Having done these, the oil companies believe that it is not their responsibility to force the Nigerian governments at their respective levels to meet their social responsibilities to their people.

The truth is that such limited intervention by the oil companies cannot serve as a substitute for a comprehensive development approach, which the situation in the Niger Delta requires. Besides, most of such money voted for the local community development often ends up in the pockets of traditional rulers and community leaders without the benefits trickling down to the local communities themselves. The problem is that instead of working with the local communities to address the pertinent problems caused by oil exploration in the various communities, the oil companies often think they could buy the cooperation of relevant officials at the various levels of government and local community leaders, both of whom would in turn keep their respective constituencies under control. It turned out in the case of the Niger Delta that this strategy has failed to achieve the desired result. Rather, it has brought about a total loss of confidence in such leaders, who have been seen, especially by the youth as traitors. As we shall see later, the ascendancy of the youths in the quest for the development of these oil communities is actually derived from the selfish attitudes of the so-called “traditional” community leaders and their official collaborators.

The local communities are not happy that they are not sufficiently involved in the petroleum business and that they are often bypassed in favour of distant operators. They are aggrieved that the relatively few Nigerians who join the foreign personnel in the top managerial positions in the oil companies are not from the local oil producing communities. On the question of lack of the relevant skills among the local communities, they feel that they could train local personnel to attain the relevant skills to enable them occupy management positions in these companies.

One important observation to be made here is the fact that the oil companies have failed to encourage the establishment of ancillary oil-related industries in these oil-producing communities to absorb the huge army of unemployed graduates. It turned out that the minutest equipment relevant to oil operations are imported rather than being fabricated or produced locally. Because the local people are not properly connected with the activities of the oil companies operating at their backyard, there is mass poverty among the local communities.

To put it bluntly, the struggle by the local communities is primarily directed towards securing increased local participation in the oil business and adequate access to the oil revenues that has bestowed a lot of development to other parts of the country. Recently, some influential members of the local communities have

decided to secure access to the oil illegally through bunkering, which has now become a big business in the Niger Delta. With the fortunes they make from bunkering, these local barons are able to maintain armed youths they now use in harassing not only their opponents, but also oil workers and state security forces.

## 2.2. Local Communities Versus the State

The problem between the local communities and the Nigerian State as represented by the various tiers of government, is also derived from what the people regard as the utter neglect of the Niger Delta region by subsequent governments of the Nigerian federation. They see the wealth generated in their area being used to build unnecessary “fly-over” structures in other cities while nothing is being done in their area where such structures are most needed to connect the various communities. Although they sit above oil, the Niger Delta people have nothing by way of meaningful development to show for it. Instead of development, there is misery all around due to environmental degradation and the subsequent loss of their traditional means of livelihood. They blame the government for failing to protect them and their environment from the adverse consequences of oil exploration. The people believe that there is a conspiracy between the government and the oil companies to get oil out of the region at all cost irrespective of what happens to the people. That is why the quickest mode of response to any agitation by the people is the deployment of security forces to suppress such agitation.

Of course, it is not as if nothing has been done on the government side to respond to the developmental needs of the Niger Delta. The truth is that much of what has been done has been merely cosmetic, and has failed to significantly improve the lot of the Niger Delta people. In July 1992, for instance, the government set up the Oil Mineral Producing Areas Development Commission (OMPADEC). The Commission was given the responsibility to receive and administer, in accordance with confirmed ratio of oil production in each State, the monthly allocation of the Federation Account set aside for oil mineral producing areas. It was specifically to administer the fund for “the rehabilitation and development of the mineral producing areas” and for “tackling ecological problems that have arisen from the exploration of oil minerals”.<sup>9</sup>

---

9 See Oil Mineral Producing Areas Development Commission Decree 1992, Decree No.23, 19<sup>th</sup> July 1992.

Although the Commission admitted that the “oil producing environments need to be rejuvenated in a well articulated programme”,<sup>10</sup> it never succeeded in producing or implementing any well articulated programme of environmental restoration in the Niger Delta. Between 1993-1997, it collected about 17.426 billion Naira,<sup>11</sup> yet with nothing much to show for it in terms of the development of the region. The Commission was apparently overwhelmed with pressures that it lost its focus and went on a contract-awarding spree with advance payment to contractors for jobs that were not eventually done. Even when money was not flowing in as expected, OMPADEC continued to award contracts, to the extent that it awarded billion Naira worth of contracts that were not backed with funds, but merely in anticipation of money yet to be earned. Little wonder then that by the time it folded up, OMPADEC owed billions of Naira to its contractors and left the Niger Delta littered with abandoned projects.

It is thus obvious why the 3% share of the Federation Account given to OMPADEC from its inception in 1992, which was increased to 6% in 1995, failed to make any meaningful impact in the lives and environment of the Niger Delta people. The money went into the pockets of emergency contractors and consultants and for the maintenance of the Commission’s bloated bureaucracy. While individual contractors and OMPADEC commissioners made fortunes from OMPADEC’s transactions, the people of the Niger Delta region remained retarded and impoverished.

As OMPADEC’s Chief Executive revealed, the second major problem that confronted the Commission was “how to cope with the volume of demands from inhabitants of the oil producing communities in order to provide for them... sustainable growth and development following decades of physical and material neglect and deprivation”; pointing out that “the demands have been overwhelming both in terms of quantity and their enduring nature even when it should be clear to all and sundry that the resources of the Commission are severely limited”.<sup>12</sup>

In all, OMPADEC’s Chief Executive highlighted three main problems that confronted the Commission. One of them was “the non-availability of data for planning purposes (such as) the crude oil production quota by States” ... for purposes of planning and allocation of funds to the States”.<sup>13</sup> The third, which the Commission claimed was the most daunting, was that of funding. While the enabling

---

10 See the Report submitted to the Presidential Advisory Committee by the Chairman/Chief Executive of OMPADEC, *An Appraisal of OMPADEC’s Activities since Inception: Challenges, Difficulties and Prospects*, November 1995, p.6.

11 See A.K. Horsfall, *The OMPADEC Dream* (London: Imprint Publishers, 1999), p.127.

12 *Ibid.*, p.5.

13 *Ibid.*, pp.4-5.

Decree establishing the Commission stipulated that OMPADEC should be given 3% of the Federation Account, the Commission claimed that what it got was “3% of net revenue from the Federation Account”.<sup>14</sup>

Also the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC), established by the Obasanjo administration has not made any significant progress in improving the living conditions of the Niger Delta people, nor the environmental conditions of the region. It appears the new Commission is repeating the mistakes of OMPADEC. It is in a hurry to satisfy Abuja contractors who parade themselves as elected representatives of the people. Instead of a comprehensive developmental blueprint that would open up the region for rapid development, the NDDC is recycling in national newspapers and magazines, pictures of so-called executed projects in a few scattered communities. These, of course, are usually projects that can yield quick returns for these Abuja politicians and a few vocal local community leaders. The most common ones include rehabilitation works, like blocks of classrooms, dispensaries and health centres, as well as supply of books and science equipment, most of which are usually given out with little or no consideration for their end-use or sustenance.

When in a recent chat with the Chairman of the NDDC, the present writer inquired why there has not been a comprehensive development blueprint for the Niger Delta, he was told that a group of consultants were still working on the document. If it will take about three years to prepare a developmental blueprint, one wonders how long its implementation would take for the people to start feeling its impact. Apparently because the people are not feeling the impact of the NDDC, there are increasing calls for its restructuring if not complete dissolution.

The response by the local communities to the apparent failure or inability of successive Nigerian governments to protect the land and people of the Niger Delta region from the hazards of hydrocarbon activities such as pollution, oil spillages, incessant gas flaring, human rights violations and subsequent economic deprivation and impoverishment, lies in the clamour for resource control. The people of the Niger Delta region strongly believe that the only way their developmental needs can be met is for them to regain ownership, control and management of their oil resources.

### **2.3. The Local Communities Against One Another**

Ordinarily, given the bundle of grievances the local communities have against the oil companies and by extension against the Nigerian State, one would have expected them to unite in the pursuit of adequate redress for their collective neglect. The

---

14 Ibid., pp.5-6.



unfortunate history of the Niger Delta is that rather than the various communities uniting to fight their common enemies, they are constantly at war with one another. Among the violent inter-community or inter-ethnic confrontations in the Niger Delta are Ogoni-Adoni, Ogoni-Okrika, Kalabari-Brass, Bille-Ke, Ijaw-Itsekiri and Itsekiri-Urhobo. The situation is such that more lives have been lost, more destruction to property has occurred and more misery has been caused to the people of the region as a result of inter-communal or inter-ethnic hostilities than through the other two previous levels of confrontation highlighted in this study, i.e., local communities versus the oil companies and local communities versus the Nigerian State.

Inter-community conflict in the Niger Delta region is traceable to the deprivation and marginalisation suffered by the people as a result of the activities of oil companies in the area. The loss of their fishing and farming lands as a result of oil pollution and spillage robbed the Niger Delta people of their traditional means of livelihood. The result has been increasing dependence by the people on handouts from the oil companies. The competition and rivalry for the largesse from the oil companies frequently lead to confrontation and hostilities between neighbouring communities that had hitherto lived in peace with one another prior to the discovery of oil in the affected area.

The above observation is corroborated by a recent study of three cases (Nembe, Bille-Ke and Peremabiri) of inter- and intra-community conflicts in the Niger Delta by Von Kemedi.<sup>15</sup> As he correctly observed, “the activities of the oil companies also weakened inter-community solidarity and relations, creating jealousies and disputes over host community status”. He maintained that the loss of traditional means of livelihood meant “more community members depend on oil company patronage or compensation, thus...making competition for access to oil company patronage even more deadly”.<sup>16</sup> Of course, the oil companies usually seize the opportunity of such hostilities between local communities to operate their “divide and rule” tactics by giving their favoured side resource support in the form of petty supply contracts, security or surveillance contracts or standby payments.<sup>17</sup>

The violent rivalry between the local communities was particularly exacerbated from the early nineties with the evolvment of a new government policy, which insisted that the funds allocated to OMPADEC be specifically used

---

15 Dimiear Von Kemedi “Community Conflicts in the Niger Delta: Petro-weapon or Policy Failure?”, Berkeley Workshop on Environmental Politics Working Paper No. WP 03-12, n.d.

16 *Ibid.*, pp.10-11.

17 *Ibid.*, p.11. See also Von Kemedi, “The Changing Predatory Styles of International Oil Companies in Nigeria”, *Review of African Political Economy*, Vol. 30, No. 95, March 2003, pp.134-139.

for developing communities from which oil was being produced. This was a deviation from the existing policy before 1993, when all revenue allocations based on derivation, were given to states from which the resources that generated the revenues were derived. The new emphasis on oil producing communities for the purpose of distributing the revenues allocated to the oil producing states led to an uncontrollable scramble for lands in which oil wells were located. As the Federal Ministry of Information observed, “suddenly, oil producing communities that had lived at peace with their neighbours found themselves at war with each other, in a struggle for control of lands containing oil wells.”<sup>18</sup>

From the above, it is obvious that so long as Nigerian leaders shy away from a comprehensive developmental blueprint for the Niger Delta, so long will the country continue to experience a bitter struggle by the various Niger Delta communities for lands containing oil wells. Nigeria must abandon what presently amounts to a “patch-patch” approach to the development of the Niger Delta. What is needed is an integrated developmental approach, which should cover the entire geographic region of the Niger Delta. Presently, because the interests of the local communities are not sufficiently covered, each community sees the other as an obstacle to its own development, which must be removed. Hence the present violent struggle by the various ethnic groups to undo one another in a struggle, which is increasingly assuming an alarming level of mutual annihilation.

### 3. The Role of the Youths

Although the discussion so far has concentrated on local communities, the actual players in the violent confrontation between the latter and the oil companies (and by extension the Nigerian State authorities) are the different youth groups, backed by some powerful and influential local ethnic warlords. What the youths of the Niger Delta region are doing is not unique to the region. It is being duplicated in all the violent conflict situations in the country. In a recently concluded study coordinated and edited by the present writer, it was found that youth groups constituted the main instruments of violence in all the case studies of ethnic conflicts spread over Nigeria’s six geo-political zones.<sup>19</sup> What is happening in the Niger Delta is the consequence of long years of apparent neglect of the youths of this

---

18 See Nigeria The Ogoni Crisis: The Truth of the Matter (Lagos: Federal Ministry of Information and Culture, n.d.), p.11.

19 See Thomas A. Imobighe (ed.) Civil Society and Ethnic Conflict Management in Nigeria (Ibadan: Spectrum Books, 2003), Chapters 4-9.

country. Why the Niger Delta situation seems to be more pronounced is that they operate in a region where the country is most vulnerable.

In Ogoni, the formation of the National Youth Council of Ogoni People (NYCOP) transformed the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) into a violent organization. In Bayelsa State, the Odi tragedy in which the Army sacked a whole village, was a reaction to the slaughtering by a group of Bayelsa youths of some Policemen sent there to maintain peace. Also the violence that has occurred in the perennial conflict in Warri has been masterminded by the youth militias of the three warring ethnic groups in that oil city. What existing studies suggest that if Nigeria wants to avoid the violence and horror attendant to such conflicts, it must effectively address the problem of youth unemployment. In the Niger Delta, efforts must be directed towards evolving a programme to gainfully employ the youth and educate them on the rules governing oil exploration in their areas, as well as how they can exploit the existing legal avenues to redress of their grievances.

#### **4. Uniqueness or Otherwise of the Niger Delta Situation**

From the discussion so far, it has been argued that certain objective conditions persist in the Niger Delta region which help to sustain a climate of conflict in the area. It is the existence or non-existence of similar conditions that would determine whether or not the Niger Delta situation could be repeated in other oil mineral producing countries. These objective conditions, which are not necessarily listed in order of importance, include:

- a. relative impoverishment and marginalization of local communities where the oil is produced;
- b. foreign exploitation of the oil resources with little or no regard to the lot of the local communities;
- c. lack of effective local community participation in the control, use and management of the resources and the distribution of the benefits;
- d. disregard to the multi-ethnic composition of the local communities in the spread of oil benefits;
- e. degradation of the ecosystem of the local communities;
- f. lack of a comprehensive development blueprint and, hence failure of State authorities to meet the developmental needs of the local communities;
- g. the failure of the Nigerian State to creatively utilize its oil money to develop the agriculture and industrial sectors of the economy; and
- h. presence of well organized, restive, alienated and jobless youths among the oil producing communities.

At this point, it will be necessary to examine a few other countries to determine the existence or non-existence of similar conditions and how this could affect or has affected the security situations in the relevant countries.

Starting with Africa, there are currently a total of twelve oil producing African countries that are net exporters of the commodity. These include Algeria, Angola, Cameroun, Democratic Republic of Congo, Egypt, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Libya, Nigeria, Republic of Congo, Sudan, and Tunisia.<sup>20</sup> There are, however, other oil producing countries in Africa, which produce more than some of the above listed countries but are not included in the above list because they are net importers of oil. These include South Africa, Ghana and Morocco. In these countries, it would seem the impact of the presence of oil resources vary significantly depending on the socio-political and economic, as well as the environmental circumstances of the relevant countries.

For instance, there are incidents of unrest in some of these countries, such as in Angola, Algeria, Sudan and Republic of Congo. While the availability of petrodollars to a great extent provides the resources for the parties to prosecute these wars and conditions the intensity of the fighting, the wars were not brought about by oil exploitation in the first instance, as is the case in Nigeria. Besides, the confrontations are essentially a struggle for power between opposing political groups rather than a struggle waged by local oil communities against the oil companies/State authorities over the control and equitable distribution of the oil wealth.

Starting with Angola, it is obvious that oil has played a significant role in powering the civil war that raged in that country, especially, since Portugal ended its colonial rule in that country in 1975. That the MPLA was able to withstand the onslaught of UNITA forces that was aided by the apartheid regime in South Africa, was principally due to the government access to the country's oil resources. Whether the country would continue to be at peace in the exploration and exploitation of its oil resources now that the civil war has been concluded, would depend very much on the extent to which the local communities are involved in the decisions affecting the management of the oil resources and the distribution of the benefits.

The conflict in Congo (Brazzaville) is essentially a struggle between the leaders of two rival ethnic groups for the control of the central government, with the oil companies providing resource support to their favoured side in the conflict. Thus while TotalFinaElf supported Sassou-Nguesso, Occidental Petroleum supported Pascal Lissouba. Although Sassou-Nguesso has presently gained the upper hand, Lissouba-controlled insurgents are still active in the country.

---

20 See Richard Knight, "Expanding Petroleum Production in Africa", in ACAS Bulletin, Fall 2002, No.64, Winter 2002/2003, p.6 & p.11 (Endnote 1).

In Sudan, most of the country's oil wealth is situated in the South that has been fighting the central government's repression since the mid-sixties, well before the discovery of oil in the area by Chevron in 1978. Also, whereas the civil war in Sudan was not caused by oil exploration, the discovery of oil has, however, greatly conditioned the fighting and the manner the war is impacting on the lives of the local communities. While the revenue from oil is providing the government with the needed resources with which to purchase sophisticated weapons to effectively prosecute the war and secure more oil fields, the need to ensure that oil production is not disrupted has led to the forceful displacement of hundreds of thousands of local communities in order to provide a cordon sanitaire for the international oil companies operating in the area.<sup>21</sup> What is obvious in the Sudanese case is that oil is presently powering the civil war and the local communities are bearing the brunt of the struggle to control Southern Sudan's oil fields. The outcome of the civil war and the manner the rehabilitation of the local communities is carried out would determine the subsequent manner of local community responsiveness to the activities of the oil companies operating in their area.

Going outside Africa, Columbia seems to produce a unique case like Nigeria where there is apparent confrontation between indigenous communities and oil companies/the State. Here again, it seems the oil factor came into play after many years of violent confrontations between local narcotic cartels and the Colombian State security forces, with massive aid and active support by the United States. With the emergence of oil as Columbia's national strategic resource in the mid-1980s and with the country emerging as a significant oil supplier to the United States, local insurgency groups extended the war to the American oil companies operating in Colombia. Of course the extension of the scope of the struggle meant increasing U.S. involvement in the war. The result is the escalation of violence and counter-violence between local armed insurgents and the oil companies, backed by the combined might of the United States and the Colombian military.

At this point, it is necessary to briefly look at a few oil-producing countries within Africa that are presently free from oil-related violence to see the extent to which they are free from the vices afflicting the Nigerian State. Starting from Gabon, Daniel Volman has shown that the country has been able to avoid major oil-related violence due to the ability of the government to manage political competition over the control, and utilization of the country's oil wealth.<sup>22</sup> What is clear from Volman's observation is that Gabon has successfully resisted the temptation of using oil money to acquire arms to suppress those who want to have a share in the control of the country's oil wealth.

---

21 See Jemera Rone, "Sudan: Oil and War", in ACAS Bulletin, *ibid.*, p.37.

The cases of Chad and Equatorial Guinea that have just entered the club of oil producers are quite relevant in drawing the necessary conclusion from our study of the Nigerian situation. The two countries seem to share some of the symptoms exhibited by Nigeria – abject poverty of the local population, foreign control of the exploitation of the resources, apparent collusion between the oil companies and the power elite to monopolize the control and utilization of the oil wealth, apparent profligacy in the use of the oil revenues for self aggrandizement, and the possibility of ecological degradation. Can the fact that these countries share in some of the symptoms of the Nigerian conflict situation be a pointer as what to expect? It does not necessary follow that because some of the indicators are the same, that the Niger Delta conflict scenario could be duplicated in these countries. The contrary appears to be the case as there is ample chance to learn from the lessons of the Niger Delta situation.

In an apparent desire to avoid Nigeria's mistakes, the financiers of Chad's oil project, have committed the country's leaders and the oil operators to a code of conduct, which specifically provided that the oil revenues would be used for economic development and social services and that the oil companies would protect the local environment and promote the economic development of the areas where the oil pipeline is currently being laid.<sup>23</sup> The above provisions are positive steps to minimize, if not eliminate, possible areas of friction in the exploitation of the country's oil resources. One can only hope that those concerned would religiously adhere to the provisions.

Equatorial Guinea's oil production has experienced rapid expansion from 7,000 barrels per day in 1995 to 181,000 barrels per day in 2001. Unlike Chad, there are no conditions specifically tying the operators of Equatorial Guinea's oil to any behavioral code, except perhaps those embodied or implied in the original agreements they signed with the Equatoguinean authorities. Whether the government would utilize the country's oil wealth for the general good of the entire people of Equatorial Guinea is therefore anybody's guess. Since they are close enough to the Niger Delta to see at first hand, the destructive impact of the oil-induced conflict in the area, it is expected that they would learn from the Nigerian experience and ensure a fair and equitable distribution of the benefits of their country's oil wealth, as well as involve the local communities in the decisions affecting the control and management of the resources.

---

22 Daniel Volman, "Oil, Arms, and Violence in Africa", in ACAS Bulletin, *ibid.*, p.15.

23 *Ibid.*

## 5. Conclusion

An attempt has been made in this paper to analyse the conflict situation in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria in its various ramifications. In the process, we have identified the parties primarily involved in the conflict, and highlighted the objective conditions of the Niger Delta situation, which tend to sustain the conflict. By way of seeing whether these conditions are peculiar to the Niger Delta, we have carried out a cursory look at oil-related conflicts in some other countries. The observation is that even where countries tend to share some common circumstances, the impact of oil resources as a conflict-inducing phenomenon vary, to some extent, from country to country. Everything depends on the country's history, the nature of its economy and its socio-political culture. Thus the usefulness of the Niger Delta situation as a model should be seen not in the dysfunctional terms of conflict inducement, but in the positive terms of conveying pertinent lessons for conflict prevention. In this regard, what one would like to advocate here is that oil resource managers should be prepared to apply the principle of system re-examination and correction from time to time in order to minimise, if not eliminate those conditions that help to breed conflict.