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### Strategies for Peace in the Niger Delta

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#### **About the Niger Delta**

The Niger Delta, an area of dense mangrove rainforest in the southern tip of Nigeria, comprises nine of Nigeria's thirty-six states: Abia, Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo, Imo, Ondo, and Rivers. The region's oil accounts for approximately 90 percent of the value of Nigeria's exports, but the Niger Delta remains one of Nigeria's least developed regions.

Conflict, present in the region for many years, began to surge appreciably in the late 1990s. In 2000, the government of President Olusegun Obasanjo created the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) to help end the violence and spur socio-economic development. Still, during and after the run-up to the 2003 presidential election, violence between rival militia groups and against the oil corporations increased considerably.

Facilitated by poverty, political disenfranchisement, and the easy availability of firearms, armed groups fought each other over the control of illegally acquired oil (so-called "bunkering") and engaged in violent acts against oil companies, such as kidnapping officials. In response to the recent unrest and also because many fear violence may again increase during the 2007 electoral period, the Obasanjo government has developed the Niger Delta Peace and Security Strategy—a complement to its Niger Delta Master Plan, which outlines a plan for economic and social development in the region.

On November 7, 2005, the United States Institute of Peace held a [public event on the peacemaking strategies](#) being pursued in the Niger Delta with Dr. Judy Asuni, director of the Nigeria-based [Academic Associates PeaceWorks](#) (AAPW). These strategies bring together representatives of the federal, state, and local governments; the oil and gas companies; the security agencies; foreign donors; and members of civil society to address the fundamental factors behind the violence in the region. AAPW is one of three groups that comprise the secretariat of the Niger Delta Peace and Security Working Group, which will implement the peace and security strategy. [Dr. David Smock](#), director of the Institute's [Religion and Peacemaking](#) Initiative, moderated the discussion. This USIPeace Briefing will outline the nature of the region's violence and the major components of the Niger Delta Peace and Security Strategy. The views expressed are those of the speakers and not the views of the Institute, which does not advocate specific policies.

#### **Violence and Conflict Resolution Efforts in the Niger Delta**

Previous governments largely ignored the Niger Delta, partly because its geography made it relatively inaccessible. The long period of military rule in Nigeria contributed to bad governance and corruption; and the burden for the provision of government services fell to oil and gas companies, which were ill equipped to supply water and electricity and maintain road networks.

The scale of this neglect, Asuni said, has been an important factor behind the violence in the Niger Delta, which is carried out by social groups or street gangs, referred to by many as "cults." These groups—made up of youths from the Niger Delta—originated with the intention of offering physical protection and providing its members with an opportunity to meet people with similar ethnic or social identities. In time, Asuni explained, these groups acquired arms and also began to compete with each other over oil bunkering.



The most recent violence in the Niger Delta, Asuni said, grew out of the political campaigns in 2003. As they competed for office, politicians in Rivers State—a focal point of violence in 2003—manipulated the Niger Delta Vigilantes, led by Ateke Tom, and the Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force, led by Alhaji Asari Dokubo. Exacerbating rivalries, political candidates used these groups to advance their aspirations—often rewarding gang members to commit acts of political violence and intimidation against their opponents.

The conclusion of the 2003 electoral period did not end the violence. The Niger Delta Vigilantes and the Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force continued to fight each other throughout 2004. The hostilities peaked, Asuni said, when over 300 commanders of the Ijaw ethnic group announced that if the government did not change conditions in the Niger Delta, they would take action against both the government and the oil installations. In September 2004, President Obasanjo invited Ateke Tom and Alhaji Asari Dokubo to the capital, Abuja. And on October 1, 2004, a peace agreement was signed between the two groups.

Following the peace agreement, AAPW worked with the Rivers State Government to disarm, demobilize, and reintegrate members of the armed groups. Over the next five months, more than 3,000 weapons were handed in and publicly destroyed. In December 2004, the former combatants requested a reconciliation church service to acknowledge the violence they had inflicted. In January 2005, a camp was organized for the former combatants to help reorient and reintegrate them into society. A program beginning in February 2005 provided over 2,000 youths with technical skills training; however, the program did not provide jobs for these youths after their training. Moreover, Asuni reported, due to the lack of an overall strategy, a coordinating agency, and a community-based program, the disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration program was never completed. Thus the gains reaped in September and October 2004 are dissipating.

Now, with the 2007 elections approaching, many fear a resurgence of violence in the Niger Delta and worry that politicians may once again mobilize youths for political ends. The threat of violence is exacerbated by international arms dealers who continue to find Nigeria a lucrative market and by neighboring African states that recruit Nigerians as mercenaries, creating a reservoir of people with the means and the motive to maintain a violent atmosphere. The mission of the Peace and Security Working Group is to prevent such a resumption of conflict, find a mechanism for sustainable peace for the region, and manage and monitor the implementation of the government's larger peace and security strategy. The Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC) provided the initial funding for the Peace and Security Working Group.

## **The Niger Delta Peace and Security Strategy**

Expanding from AAPW's previous focus on Rivers State, the Peace and Security Working Group also considers security issues in Bayelsa, Akwa Ibom, Ondo, and Delta states. The agenda of the Peace and Security Working Group is coordinated by the International Centre for Reconciliation (Coventry Cathedral, UK); AAPW; and Our Niger Delta, a group of youths from the Niger Delta, and places heavy emphasis on linking peace and development—the same strategy adopted by the oil and gas companies in the region and one that complements the work of the NDDC. A central objective of the Peace and Security Working Group is to determine how the skills of the armed groups can be harnessed for positive purposes.

As described by Asuni, the Niger Delta Peace and Security Strategy has a comprehensive agenda that draws in the Niger Delta's major stakeholders to address the pressing issues that affect security and economic development in the region. These stakeholders include federal, local, and state governments; oil and gas corporations; civil society (which include foreign donors); the NDDC; the NNPC; and local communities. In this regard, the peace and security strategy will target the corporate, media, governmental, international, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to address oil corporations' responsibility toward the Niger Delta. It will also focus on mechanisms to reduce oil theft; media practices in reporting violence; reconciliation between groups; illegal arms importation; disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration of militia groups; human capital development and employment/urban youth policies; early warning systems; money laundering; and good governance. Asuni summarized the key issues of each topic.

**Corporate Responsibility:** Oil and gas corporations remain the target of grievances by local groups in the Niger Delta. A committee on corporate practices chaired by the NNPC will examine the causes of conflict and corruption, how to increase corporate transparency, and how to more effectively enforce good policies. One participant added that oil companies and the government should increase transparency by instituting the "publish what you pay" system where the government reports all revenues received by oil corporations. Alternatively, Alaska's Permanent Fund system—where residents receive an annual dividend from oil's proceeds—was suggested as a model for the Niger Delta to increase resource transparency.

**Reducing Oil Theft:** Oil theft is one of the major causes of conflict between rival armed groups as illegally acquired oil is sold on black markets for high profits. Indeed, as the price of oil increases, the loss to the state increases as well. For example, Asuni reported, when oil stood at \$20 per barrel, the Nigerian government lost \$3.7 billion per year; when oil prices rose to \$30 per barrel, the Nigerian government lost more than \$6 billion annually. The working group will coordinate efforts with local, state, and federal authorities to understand the factors that facilitate oil theft. Focusing on the external markets, it will launch an international campaign against oil theft. However, the most effective strategy to stop the thievery, Asuni asserted, was to create alternative sources of income.

**Media Relations:** News reports play a large role in sensationalizing and thus exacerbating conflicts. Subsequently, part of the peace and security strategy is working with the media on how they report conflicts in the Niger Delta and ensuring that the media fully understands the purposes of the working group.

**Reconciliation Processes:** Initial reconciliation efforts will begin with the Ogoni conflict in Rivers State, which dates back to the mid 1990s. In time, this will serve as a model for settling grievances of other groups in the Niger Delta—demonstrating an alternative to violence as a means to settle disputes.

**Arms Importation:** The easy acquisition of small arms and light weapons in the Niger Delta undermines disarmament and demobilization efforts. Working with local, state, federal, and international agencies, the Peace and Security Working Group will undertake efforts to reduce illegal arms importation; facilitate the exchange of information between relevant agencies; and review the accountability standards of local and international weapons' manufacturers. A particular focus, Asuni stressed, will be to curb the illicit arms trade at the international level.

**Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration:** Previous attempts at disarmament, demobilization,

and reintegration did not succeed due to the absence of a coordinating body and alternative employment possibilities, according to Asuni. In this regard, the Peace and Security Working Group plans a more comprehensive approach that will address the incentives of groups to hold arms; implement "best practices" from successful programs; institute a process for destroying weapons; invite international observers to monitor disarmament processes; and ensure coordination between disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration efforts. In addition, the reintegration programs will include meaningful employment opportunities.

**Human Capital Development and Employment/Urban Youth Policies:** Concerned that demobilization and disarmament may increase the amount of cult group and illegal activity, as former insurgents will not have options for employment, job creation strategies must be comprehensive. As such, human capital development and employment strategies pursued by the Peace and Security Working Group will include developing a profile of cults, such as incentives behind their formation, leadership, membership, and territory. Additionally, the Peace and Security Working Group, will work with oil and gas companies in the Niger Delta to develop leadership skills and the NDDC to create jobs.

Indeed, participants stressed the importance of finding economic opportunities for the youth of the Niger Delta. Suggestions included: the possibility of establishing a public works program; developing sectors outside of oil and gas, which are traditionally not labor-intensive industries; and special employment set-asides for the Niger Delta's residents. On this front, Asuni reported some progress had been made with the NNPC assuming the responsibility to monitor that 25 percent of management positions and 67 percent of staff positions in the oil and gas companies go to those from the Niger Delta. Alternatively, some pointed out that cleaning up the Niger Delta communities might also serve as a way to engage the youth and address the environmental damage by the oil industry.

**Early Warning:** The Peace and Security Working Group will design a system for early warning of conflict. Devising a comprehensive early warning system on impending violence will require the integration of local networks, investment in effective communication methods, building the capacity of governments and NGOs to respond to crises, and recruiting experts to design conflict analysis methods appropriate for the Niger Delta.

**Money Laundering:** Money laundering activities undermine the search for peace and the creation of legal markets in the Niger Delta. Thus, in coordination with international financial institutions, NGOs, and government agencies, the Peace and Security Working Group will devise means to prevent money laundering in Nigeria and means to return money that has been stolen (as occurred with funds taken by former head of state, General Sani Abacha).

**Good Governance:** Civil society groups in the Niger Delta emphasized the importance of good governance as a key component of conflict prevention in the region. Many felt that the issue of governance, values, and ethics were missing factors in the Niger Delta. In particular, good governance would engender accountability in development efforts.

### **Concluding Recommendations**

Responding to worries that the Niger Delta's militias might regroup as the 2007 elections approach, the Peace and Security Working Group is part of the effort the government has taken to address rising violence in the region. A number of participants recommended a focus on economic development and greater transparency by the government and oil and gas companies as means to address unrest in the region. More concretely, the keys to peace in the Niger Delta, Asuni emphasized, will lie in the ability to reintegrate demobilized combatants successfully, engage and employ the youth, and build strong partnerships with the Niger Delta's civil society organizations and the federal government.

### **Of Related Interest**

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